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# Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief

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## Introduction

Several Turkish foreign and domestic policy issues have significant relevance for U.S. interests, and Congress plays an active role in shaping and overseeing U.S. relations with Turkey.

This report provides information and analysis relevant for Congress on the following:

- Assessments of U.S.-Turkey relations and Turkish foreign policy.
- Various aspects of U.S.-Turkey cooperation against the Islamic State organization (IS, also known as Daesh, ISIS, and ISIL) in Syria and Iraq, including border security and discussion of “safe zones,” foreign fighters and smuggling, refugees, and complications regarding Kurdish groups.
- Turkey’s November 24, 2015, downing of a Russian aircraft and a possible improvement of Turkey-Israel ties.
- Key issues regarding Turkey’s domestic politics. These include controversies and questions involving Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* or AKP) following the AKP’s November 2015 electoral victory, and the Turkish government’s renewed hostilities (since July) with the longtime Kurdish nationalist insurgent group PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party or *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*).

For additional information and analysis, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

## U.S.-Turkey Relations and Turkish Foreign Policy

There have been many situations in which the United States and Turkey have made common cause during their decades-long alliance in NATO, but their strategic cooperation also has a history of complications. This is based largely on divergences in leaders’ assessments of respective interests given (1) different geographical positions, (2) threat perceptions, and (3) roles in regional and global political and security architectures. Domestic politics in both countries have also played a role. Nonetheless, both countries have continued to affirm the importance of an enduring strategic relationship.

Since the mid-2000s, President (formerly Prime Minister) Erdogan and Prime Minister (formerly Foreign Minister) Ahmet Davutoglu have consistently articulated an ambitious foreign policy vision. This vision draws upon Turkey’s historical, cultural, and religious knowledge of and ties with other regional actors, as well as its soft power appeal.<sup>1</sup> Erdogan, Davutoglu, and other Turkish leaders often indicate to the United States and other countries that Turkey’s unique regional status as a Muslim-majority democracy with a robust economy and membership in NATO can positively influence surrounding geographical areas both politically and economically.

Turkey has become a more influential actor in the Middle East in the past decade, having sought to leverage the regional status discussed above. However, recent foreign and domestic policy developments may have rendered Turkey less potent or desirable than once generally supposed as a shaper of regional outcomes, a model for neighboring countries, and a facilitator of U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Ahmet Davutoglu, “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring,” International Policy and Leadership Institute and Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Turkey Policy Brief Series, 2012 – Third Edition.

interests. Still, it remains a key regional power that shares linkages and characteristics with the West that may distinguish it from other potentially region-shaping Muslim-majority powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Therefore, working with Turkey is likely to remain relevant for the advancement of U.S. interests in the volatile region.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, engagement with Turkey—critical as it might be on specific issues—is unlikely to overshadow other aspects of a U.S. multilateral approach to addressing problems in the region.

Turkey’s NATO membership and economic interdependence with Europe appear to have contributed to important Turkish decisions to rely on, and partner with, sources of Western strength. However, as Turkey has prospered, its economic success has taken place alongside efforts to seek greater overall self-reliance and independence in foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure I. Turkey: Map and Basic Facts**



**Sources:** Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated by Hannah Fischer using Department of State Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); ArcWorld (2014); DeLorme (2014). Fact information (2015

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., M. Hakan Yavuz and Mujeeb R. Khan, “Turkey Treads a Positive Path,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Among other Turkish foreign policy initiatives, in mid-December 2015 Turkey announced that it would construct a multipurpose military base in Qatar. The base, which is being established pursuant to a 2014 bilateral security agreement, appears to be calculated to intensify the two countries’ partnership against common security threats at a time of regional instability. Both countries “have provided support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, backed rebels fighting to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and raised the alarm about creeping Iranian influence in the region.” Tom Finn, “Turkey to set up Qatar military base to face ‘common enemies,’” *Reuters*, December 16, 2015.

estimates unless otherwise specified) from International Monetary Fund, *Global Economic Outlook*; Turkish Statistical Institute; Economist Intelligence Unit; and Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*.

# U.S.-Turkey Coordination Against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

## Overall Assessment

Turkey is partnering with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition in a number of ways, along with a host of other regional U.S. partners—including several Arab states, Iraq’s central government, and Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria. Recent refugee influxes and terrorist incidents have increased U.S. and European expectations regarding Turkish cooperation in countering the Islamic State organization. Such expectations seem to center on Turkey’s willingness and ability to:

- prevent the flow of refugees and migrants transiting its territory for Europe;
- prevent the flow of fighters, weapons, oil, and other non-humanitarian supplies into and out of Syria; and
- more clearly prioritize anti-IS efforts vis-à-vis Turkey’s other strategic concerns regarding Kurdish groups and the Asad regime in Syria.

For example, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, in December 1, 2015, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, said:

We need Turkey to do more. We need it to do more within its own territory, [so it] controls its border, which it has not done effectively since ISIL first arose. That is [it] goes after the facilitators, the enablers, and the other tentacles of ISIL that intrude into Turkey.

In subsequent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on December 9, Secretary Carter said that Turkish officials “have done some more. We’re helping them do yet more, but it’s critical that they control their border.”

Turkish leaders sometimes express concern that U.S. expectations of Turkish efforts are insufficiently sensitive to Turkey’s domestic pressures and security vulnerabilities. Turkey faces the significant burden of hosting refugees from Syria and elsewhere; more than two million refugees have entered Turkey since 2011, and they are particularly concentrated in its southeast and its main urban centers. Turkish anxieties seem centered on:

- countering perceived threats to Turkish security, territorial integrity, and domestic stability;
- reducing Turkey’s responsibilities for refugees and ending the conflicts that produce refugees; and
- achieving lasting resolutions in Syria and Iraq that relieve threats against Turkey, maximize Turkey’s regional influence, and provide substantive political empowerment for Sunni Arabs and Turkmen.

Throughout the course of the conflict in Syria, U.S.-Turkey differences have surfaced in relation to objectives and related policies. President Erdogan and President Obama reportedly have had

less direct interaction since 2013, perhaps owing to differences over both foreign policy and the Turkish government's handling of domestic affairs.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there is ongoing coordination on security matters, and in December 2015, an appeal by President Obama to Erdogan apparently prompted Turkey to withdraw some Turkish troops from northern Iraq whose deployment had created tensions with Iraq's central government.<sup>5</sup>

### **Turkish Downing of Russian Aircraft; Possible Improvement of Turkey-Israel Ties**

On November 24, 2015, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24 aircraft. Turkish and U.S. official sources indicate (though Russia disputes this) that the incident occurred in Turkish airspace after multiple warnings had been provided to the Su-24. One of the two Russian crew members and one member of a Russian search-and-rescue team were reportedly killed by Syrian oppositionists after the crew members parachuted into Syrian territory.

Russian President Vladimir Putin called the incident a "stab in the back" by Turkey. In the absence of a Turkish apology, Russia has imposed a number of economic sanctions on Turkey. Additionally, work on a nuclear reactor in Turkey (involving a Russian company) and on a Turkey-Russia natural gas pipeline known as "Turkish Stream"<sup>6</sup> reportedly may have been affected. Also, Russian officials have publicly presented evidence that they claim indicates high-level Turkish involvement in IS oil smuggling—a claim that has been categorically denied by U.S. officials.

Russia's sanctions have not extended to its natural gas exports to Turkey, which account for nearly 60% of Turkey's natural gas consumption. Even so, some analysts suggest that Turkish concerns about future energy trade with Russia, as well as concerns about larger regional geopolitical rivalry, may have sped up the process by which Turkish officials appear to have agreed in December 2015 to a framework—still subject to final negotiation—for improving long-frayed ties with Israel, given the future possibility that Turkey might import Israeli offshore gas.<sup>7</sup>

The downing of the Russian aircraft occurred within the context of reported previous Russian breaches of Turkish airspace, past Syria-Turkey incidents involving downed aircraft (including one incident in which Russia may have advised Syria), and Russia-Syria joint operations against Turkmen enclaves in northwest Syria. Reports indicate that—partly in retaliation for the incident—Russia may be supporting Syrian Kurdish forces.<sup>8</sup>

Officials from the United States and other NATO countries have publicly supported Turkey's right to defend its borders. However, observers speculate about possible escalation of NATO-Russia tensions and potential complications to efforts at diplomacy in Syria and international unity against the Islamic State. According to one analysis, "It remains to be seen if these two proud leaders [Erdogan and Putin], who rarely back down in crises, will be able to repair [the Turkey-Russia relationship] for the sake of the advantages that they both perceived in their previous cooperation."<sup>9</sup>

As of mid-December 2015, concerns about possible Russian retaliation appear to have prevented Turkey from approving air sorties in Syria since the November 24 incident.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "The Fragile Thaw in U.S.-Turkey Relations," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2402, April 7, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey will withdraw more troops from Iraq after US request," *Associated Press*, December 20, 2015. Additionally in December, a media report stated that U.S.-Turkey intelligence cooperation had produced specific warnings regarding the threat of future Islamic State attacks on U.S. interests or tourist areas in Turkey. "Turkey on alert after CIA intel on ISIL attack threat," *hurriyetdailynews.com*, December 11, 2015. Subsequently, Turkish authorities have arrested a number of Syrian nationals who are suspected Islamic State operatives, possibly in connection with a plot to attack the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul. Meghan Keneally, "ISIS Supporter Arrested for Allegedly Planning Attack on US Consulate in Istanbul," *ABC News*, December 15, 2015; "Istanbul police detain 11 in anti-terror operation," *Anadolu Agency*, December 17, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> For information on these projects, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Barak Ravid, "After Five Years, Israel and Turkey Agree on Reconciliation Pact," *haaretz.com*, December 17, 2015; Onur Ant, et al., "Turk-Israel Reconciliation Talks Intensify on Russia Crisis," *Bloomberg*, December 16, 2015; Cengiz Candar, "How Turkey's foreign affairs 'strongman' left his mark," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, December 22, 2015; "Talks with Israel to not change Turkey's Gaza stand: PM," *Anadolu Agency*, December 22, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Fabrice Balanche, "The Struggle for Azaz Corridor Could Spur a Turkish Intervention," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #2532, December 11, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Bulent Aliriza and Ali Uslu, "The Turco-Russian Crisis: Erdogan vs. Putin," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Turkey Project, December 16, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Burak Ege Bekdil, "Carter Seeks New Ways to Fight ISIL in Turkey Visit," *Defense News*, December 15, 2015.

Figure 2. Map of U.S. and NATO Military Presence in Turkey



**Sources:** Department of Defense, NATO, and various media outlets; adapted by CRS.

**Notes:** All locations are approximate. All bases are under Turkish sovereignty, with portions of them used for limited purposes by the U.S. military and NATO.

## Anti-IS “Zones” in Syria?

Turkey and some Arab states have supported a variety of armed Syrian opposition groups, and Turkey has long advocated the creation of a “safe zone” within Syria along the two countries’ border. To some extent, such advocacy resembles pleas that Turkish leaders made following the 1991 Gulf War for help in preventing refugee burdens.<sup>11</sup> In that case, the United States established a humanitarian safe zone with ground forces and then patrolled a no-fly zone in northern Iraq.<sup>12</sup> In December 9, 2015, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary of Defense Carter said:

<sup>11</sup> Morton Abramowitz, “Remembering Turgut Ozal: Some Personal Recollections,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> For information on some of those operations, see Gordon W. Rudd, *Humanitarian Intervention: Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, 1991*, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2004, available at [http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian\\_intervention/CMH\\_70-78.pdf](http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian_intervention/CMH_70-78.pdf).



With respect to safe zones, ... I've certainly thought about that a great deal. [The] concept of a safe zone would be to create a patch of Syria [wherein] people who are inclined to go there, could go there and be protected. They would need to be protected because you can foresee that at least ISIL and other radical groups, and quite possibly elements of the Assad regime, [would] undertake to prove that it wasn't safe.

And so it would have to be made safe. And that takes us back to the question of [what's] an appropriate force of that size to protect a zone of that size. [In] our estimate, it's substantial. And again, I don't see, much as I wish otherwise, anybody offering to furnish that force.

I also think we have thought about who might want to reside in such a zone. I think it would be undesirable [if it] became a place into which people were pushed, say, from Turkey or Europe, expelled, so to speak, into this zone. I don't know what the people who now live in the zone would think about other people coming into the zone. That would have to be taken into account, and whether other people want to live there.

[So] we have thought about it. It's complicated. We have not recommended that because it's an undertaking of substantial scale where [in] my judgment, the costs outweigh the benefits.

In a December 1 House Armed Services Committee hearing, General Joseph Dunford (USMC), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, equated a hypothetical establishment of a no-fly zone with declaring war on Syria.

In connection with Turkey's decision in the summer of 2015 to allow U.S. and coalition use of its bases to conduct anti-IS strikes in Syria and Iraq, and to join in some of those strikes, U.S.-Turkey discussions reportedly commenced about possible operations to clear a key area of IS control and border transit in northern Syria (see **Figure 3**). However, subsequent developments, including Russia's heightened military involvement in Syria and its apparent installation of S-400 air defense systems in Syria following the late November Turkish downing of a Russian aircraft (see textbox above), may have reduced U.S. willingness to consider establishing an "IS-free" zone.

U.S. official statements since mid-November have emphasized heightening Turkish border security deployments on the Turkish side of the border opposite the key area of IS control, while carrying out coalition airstrikes on the Syrian side in support of anti-IS ground forces.<sup>13</sup> Turkey has indicated its willingness to additionally bolster border security in principle (see "Countering Foreign Fighters and Smuggling" below for information on recent efforts Turkey has already made to bolster security), but details and timeframes remain unclear. Turkish officials may also be reluctant to take specific steps without signs of progress by coalition-supported anti-IS ground forces in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

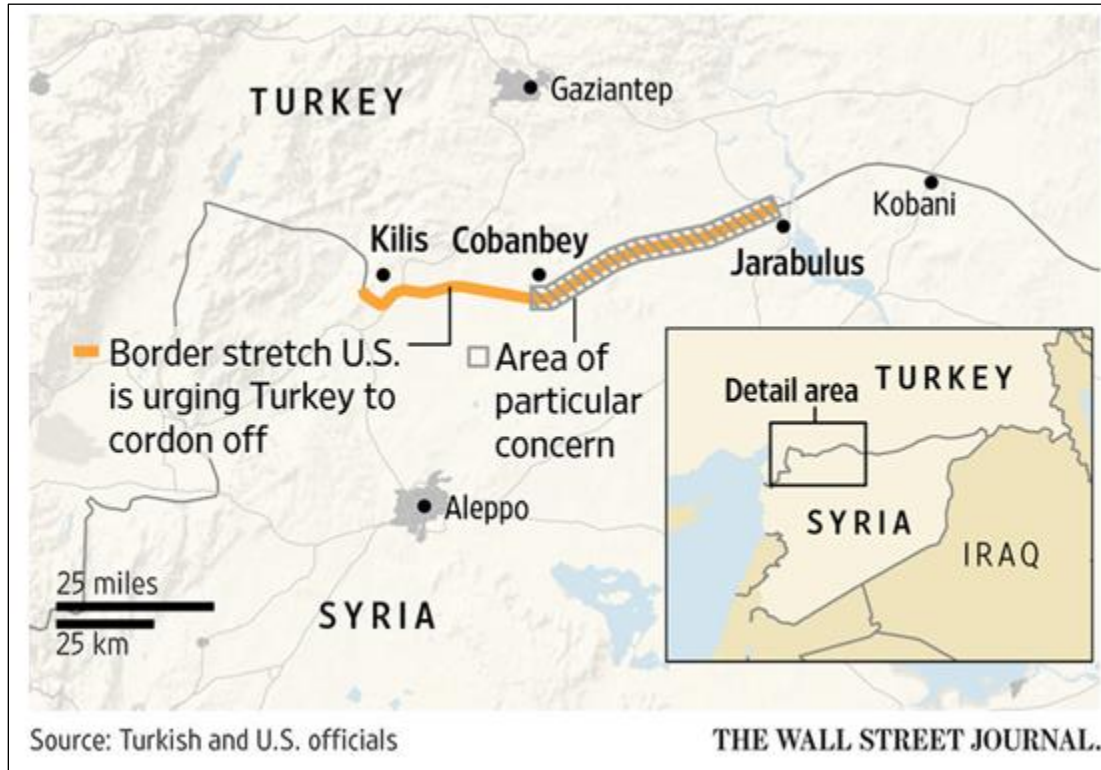
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<sup>13</sup> Adam Entous, et al., "U.S. Urges Turkey to Seal Border," *wsj.com*, November 27, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 3. Turkey-Syria Border Area Reportedly Used by the Islamic State**  
(as of November 2015)



Even if the United States and Turkey eventually move forward to establish some sort of patrolled zone, who might secure such an area on the ground remains unclear. Turkey clearly rejects the notion of permitting Syrian Kurdish forces (PYD/YPG, described below) to occupy the area. Apparent Russian air support for the YPG may challenge Turkey’s efforts to prevent PYD control in the area,<sup>15</sup> and could at some point fuel U.S.-Russia competition for Syrian Kurdish support that might isolate Turkey further in its adversarial stance toward the YPG. Of the Sunni Arab or Turkmen groups that could be used to patrol the area in question, media reports indicate that the United States is unwilling to accept some Islamist groups that have received support from Turkey and other Arab states.<sup>16</sup> Other groups that might be more acceptable to the United States might be too focused on defending territory in northwestern Syria against the Asad regime and Russia.<sup>17</sup>

## Refugee Flows and a Turkey-European Union Arrangement

Turkish officials have expressed hopes that an “IS-free” zone might create opportunities for the more than two million Syrian refugees that Turkey currently hosts—as well as others from Iraq and elsewhere—to return to their home country and to mitigate future refugee flows.<sup>18</sup> An

<sup>15</sup> “With Russian air support, PYD strives to make gains in NW Syria,” *Anadolu Agency*, November 30, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Jamie Dettmer, “Russia’s Buildup in Syria May Thwart Idea of Safe Haven,” *Voice of America*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Entous, et al., op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Barnard, et al., “Turkey and U.S. Plan to Create Syria ‘Safe Zone’ Free of ISIS,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2015.

unknown number of these refugees are seeking permanent refuge in Europe. Reportedly, some “have been living in Turkey for months, sometimes years. Some of them complain that Turkey’s failure to grant them full refugee status has made it a struggle to access basic services and jobs.”<sup>19</sup>

Some refugees from third countries and undocumented migrants have crossed over Turkish territory to Europe via land. However, given relatively strong controls at Turkey’s borders with European Union countries, particularly under current circumstances, many refugees and migrants have opted for sea routes—especially to nearby Greek islands—on crowded boats under questionable safety conditions.<sup>20</sup> According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 900,000 refugees and migrants—many of whom use Turkey as a point of transit—have arrived in Europe via sea in 2015.<sup>21</sup> According to a Turkish government source,<sup>22</sup> in 2015 the Turkish Coast Guard initiated two new operations—one in the Aegean Sea and one in the Mediterranean—aimed at maintaining safety and security. The operations cost approximately \$65 million on an annualized basis, and have been responsible for the rescue or interdiction of thousands of people in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

At a late November 2015 summit meeting, the European Union (EU) agreed to provide Turkey (1) €3 billion in humanitarian aid,<sup>24</sup> (2) a timetable for a possible future grant of visa-free travel to the EU for Turks, and (3) resumption of some EU accession negotiations in exchange for Turkey’s agreement to increase its cooperation in stemming refugee and migrant flows and in readmitting or returning non-refugee migrants to their countries of origin.<sup>25</sup> Some observers question Turkey’s capacity to stem or reverse these flows. Furthermore, according to one source:

Refugee advocates warn that putting too much pressure on Turkey to prevent refugees from moving westward could have nasty consequences, increasing the risk of “push-

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<sup>19</sup> “Refugees dispersed from Turkey-Greece border in buses,” *Agence France Presse*, September 20, 2015. According to the instrument of its accession to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, “the Government of Turkey maintains the provisions of the declaration made under section B of article I of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, done at Geneva on 28 July 1951, according to which it applies the Convention only to persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe,” [http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/international\\_treaties.php?id\\_state=226](http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/international_treaties.php?id_state=226). In 2014, Turkey enacted a Law on Foreigners and International Protection which—despite the geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention—provides protection and assistance for asylum-seekers and refugees, regardless of their country of origin. 2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Turkey.

<sup>20</sup> Rick Lyman, “Bulgaria Puts Up a New Wall, but This One Keeps People Out,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>; Loveday Morris, “E.U. expects ‘immediate’ clampdown on migrants in deal with Turkey,” *washingtonpost.com*, November 29, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> This source was provided via CRS email correspondence with a Turkish official on December 16, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> According to Turkish media sources, “Over the past six months, Turkish Coast Guards have rescued around 111,000 migrants who sought to traverse the sea in order to attain a better standard of living. Some 74,000 of them were reportedly Syrians. Those rescued were also of Afghan, Myanmar and Iraqi origin.” “Migrants saved off Turkey’s west rise 70 pct in five years,” *hurriyetdailynews.com*, December 17, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Turkey has spent approximately \$8.73 billion on refugee needs since 2011. “Turkey provides education for 300,000 Syrian refugees,” *Anadolu Agency*, December 23, 2015. As of September 2015, U.S. assistance for Syrian refugees in Turkey since FY2012 totaled more than \$325 million. September 21, 2015, Department of State factsheet available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/247115.htm>. For additional context, see <http://www.cidr.org/wp-content/uploads/12.11.15-USG-Syria-Complex-Emergency-Fact-Sheet-1.pdf> and <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Council of the European Union, Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey - EU-Turkey statement, 29/11/2015.

backs” and police brutality. There are already reports that Turkey has begun refusing entry to Syrians fleeing the war, a violation of the Convention on Refugees.<sup>26</sup>

Also, some observers claim that the additional EU resources to Turkey will not address larger questions regarding refugees’ employment, education, and legal status that may be a factor in the decision of some refugees to leave Turkey for Europe.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, some human rights activists, anticipating the EU-Turkey summit arrangement, expressed concern that it might result in reduced international scrutiny of Turkey’s commitment to civil liberties.<sup>28</sup>

## Countering Foreign Fighters and Smuggling

Congress and other U.S. policymakers, along with many international actors, have shown significant concern about the use of Turkish territory by various groups and individuals involved in Syria’s conflict—including foreign fighters from around the world—for transit, safe haven, and smuggling. At various points during the course of the conflict in Syria, some Western officials and observers have accused Turkish officials or policymakers of insufficient vigilance in countering jihadist use of Turkish territory.<sup>29</sup> Some accusations even claim that Turkish officials have acquiesced to or been complicit in such use, due either to profit-seeking or to Turkish animus against Kurdish groups and the Asad regime.<sup>30</sup>

In response to international pressure<sup>31</sup> and growing Turkish official recognition of threats posed to Turkish security by the Islamic State and other jihadists, Turkey has introduced or bolstered existing initiatives since the last half of 2014 aimed at (1) preventing potential foreign fighters from entering Turkey, (2) preventing those who enter Turkey from traveling to Syria, and (3) curbing illicit oil smuggling used to finance jihadist activities.<sup>32</sup>

However, Turkey faces ongoing challenges in pursuing policies that can simultaneously provide a humanitarian corridor for refugees and humanitarian assistance while clamping down on foreign fighter flows and smuggling. According to one March 2015 source, “Turkish officials also say

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<sup>26</sup> “Refugees in Turkey: Europe has a deal with Turkey, but migrants will keep coming,” *Economist*, November 30, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Tim Arango, “Merkel Links Turkey’s E.U. Hopes to Stemming Flow of Refugees,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> For example, a few months after the Islamic State’s summer 2014 takeover of considerable portions of Iraqi territory, Vice President Joe Biden said that Turkey and other countries had contributed to a sectarian proxy war in an attempt to oust Asad, and that President Erdogan had told him “we let too many people through, now we are trying to seal the border.” Erdogan responded by publicly denying that he had made those statements to Biden, and Biden subsequently issued an apology. Lale Sariibrahimoglu, “On the borderline – Turkey’s ambiguous approach to Islamic State,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, October 16, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Martin Chulov, “Turkey sends in jets as Syria’s agony spills over every border,” *The Observer* (UK), July 25, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> U.N. Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2178 (passed in August and September 2014, respectively) call upon member states to curtail flows of weapons, financing, and fighters to various terrorist groups.

<sup>32</sup> Information on these initiatives were provided to CRS by a Turkish government official to CRS via (1) a March 17, 2015, factsheet and (2) December 9, 2015, email correspondence. The initiatives include enforcing an existing “no-entry” list, establishing “risk analysis” units, boosting border security personnel from 12,000 to 20,000, strengthening border infrastructure, adding border air reconnaissance, carrying out zero-point checks for goods crossing the border, capturing oil stores, and destroying illegal pipelines. For information on oil smuggling from Syria into Turkey, see CRS Report R43980, *Islamic State Financing and U.S. Policy Approaches*, by Carla E. Humud, Robert Pirog, and Liana W. Rosen.

they are limited by restraints on intelligence sharing from Western countries, which they say has improved but remains inadequate.”<sup>33</sup>

## Complications Involving the Kurds

Many observers speculate that Turkey’s increased coordination with the United States is aimed at gaining greater influence over the unfolding geopolitical, ethnic, and sectarian struggle along the Turkey-Syria frontier.<sup>34</sup> Shortly after Turkey commenced military strikes against the Islamic State in Syria in late July, Turkey resumed hostilities with the longtime Kurdish nationalist insurgent group PKK. A number of analysts have speculated that Turkey is more concerned about containing Kurdish political aspirations (with their potential cross-border implications) than countering Islamist extremism at and within its borders.<sup>35</sup> Turkey is reportedly worried about recent territorial gains by the People’s Protection Units (Kurdish acronym YPG), a militia dominated by the Syrian Kurdish group known as the Democratic Union Party (Kurdish acronym PYD),<sup>36</sup> as well as about U.S.-PYD/YPG coordination.

The PYD is closely affiliated with the PKK.<sup>37</sup> PYD leaders routinely insist that it maintains an independent identity, yet several sources indicate that PYD-PKK links persist, including with respect to personnel.<sup>38</sup> Gains by the YPG during the Syrian conflict have raised the possibility of PKK-affiliated control over most of Syria’s northern border.<sup>39</sup> In June 2015, President Erdogan said, “We will never allow the establishment of a state in Syria’s north and our south. We will continue to fight in this regard no matter what it costs.”<sup>40</sup> In September 2015, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said:

By mounting operations against [IS] and the PKK at the same time, we also prevented the PKK from legitimizing itself. Until the PYD changes its stance, we will continue to see it in the same way that we see the PKK.<sup>41</sup>

In October 2015, Davutoglu warned that Turkey would not tolerate PYD/YPG movements west of the Euphrates River in Syria, and claimed that Turkish forces had struck PYD/YPG positions twice.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, “A Path to ISIS, Through a Porous Turkish Border,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2015. Reportedly, the European Union does not fully cooperate in the areas of police and judicial cooperation because Turkey does not have a data protection law, and because of differences between the two in defining and penalizing terrorism. Sariibrahimoglu, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, “Turkey agrees to allow U.S. military to use its base to attack Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, July 23, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Orhan Coskun and Dasha Afanasieva, “Turkey stages first air strikes on Islamic State in Syria,” *Reuters*, July 24, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> The YPG is formally the military arm of a de facto government established by the PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The KNC is aligned with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant faction within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq led by President Masoud Barzani. Soner Cagaptay and Andrew Tabler, “The U.S.-PYD-Turkey Puzzle,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2510, October 25, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Reportedly, the PYD was “established in 2003 by Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants of Syrian origin in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq.” Heiko Wimmen and Müzehher Selcuk, “The Rise of Syria’s Kurds,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Chase Winter, “Turkey and the Kurds Hold the Key to Defeating the Islamic State,” *Vice*, October 3, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Henri J. Barkey, “What’s Behind Turkey’s U-Turn on the Islamic State?,” Woodrow Wilson Center, July 29, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Wes Enzinna, “A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS’ Backyard,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Semih Idiz, “Turkey’s Middle East policy ‘fiasco,’” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, September 28, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> “Davutoğlu says Turkey has struck PYD in Syria twice,” *todayzaman.com*, October 27, 2015.

Although the United States has considered the PKK to be a terrorist group since 1997, it does not apply this characterization to the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG. A State Department deputy spokesperson said in an October 20, 2014, daily press briefing that “the PYD is a different group than the PKK legally, under United States law.” In a September 21, 2015, daily press briefing, the State Department spokesperson said that the United States does not consider the YPG to be a terrorist organization, and added with regard to Turkish concerns about the group that a coalition of the willing does not “have to agree on every issue.”

## Key U.S. Policy Questions

A number of questions surround U.S.-Turkey dealings regarding Syria and Iraq. These include:

- To what extent might Russian-Iranian and U.S.-led actions in Syria—potentially seen by significant segments of Turkey’s population as bolstering anti-Sunni and pro-Kurdish outcomes—affect Turkey’s willingness to counter the Islamic State?
- How can the United States coordinate operations with both Turkey and the PYD/YPG, and what are the larger implications for the parties and the region?
- What effect will U.S.-Turkey dealings have on military and political outcomes in Syria? Will they make the survival of Bashar al Asad and his regime more or less likely? Would Turkey benefit from a de facto or formal partition of Syria?
- How will developments in the region and in potential destination countries in Europe affect the situation of Syrian and other refugees currently in Turkey? To what extent are refugees likely to remain in Turkey, return home to their countries of origin, or find permanent residency in third countries?

## Domestic Politics and Stability

### Overview

Turkish domestic politics feature controversies regarding power, constitutional democracy, corruption, and civil liberties. Contentious discussions also focus on renewed Turkey-PKK conflict with the potential to destabilize significant areas of the country, security concerns regarding Syria and Iraq, and economic anxieties. Vigorous debate over whether (and, if so, how) President Erdogan exercises authoritarian control over Turkey’s government and society will likely continue for the foreseeable future, especially after the AKP, the party he founded and still leads de facto, regained its parliamentary majority in November 2015 elections (after having lost the majority in June 2015 elections). Since the November elections, Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu have sought popular and cross-party support that they need for constitutional changes that would boost Erdogan’s presidential power, and a number of prominent Turkish journalists with a history of criticizing the government have been detained.<sup>43</sup>

It is unclear to what extent non-Turkish actors will play a significant role in resolving unanswered questions regarding Turkey’s commitment to democracy and limited government, its secular-religious balance, and its Kurdish question. Erdogan and his supporters periodically resort to criticism of Western countries in apparent efforts to galvanize domestic political support against

<sup>43</sup> Dorian Jones, “Turkey’s Detention of Journalists Sparks Criticism,” *Voice of America*, November 27, 2015.



outside influences.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, some observers assert that various security-related concerns—such as those involving the Islamic State and refugees—make the United States and the European Union less likely to try to check Turkish officials’ domestic actions.<sup>45</sup>

## Ongoing Turkey-PKK Violence and Future Prospects

Turkey’s government and the PKK resumed hostilities in July 2015 amid mutual recrimination, ending a cease-fire that had been in place since March 2013 as part of a broader Turkey-PKK “peace process.” Since the resumption, Turkish authorities have arrested hundreds of terrorism suspects in southeastern Turkey and Turkey-PKK violence has resulted in hundreds of casualties<sup>46</sup> and the reported displacement of nearly 200,000 people.<sup>47</sup>

The following is one Turkish journalist’s explanation of key contributing factors to the resumption of violence:

...the growing strength of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the civil war in Syria have given a boost to Kurdish nationalism and have been advantageous for the PKK. PKK leadership, aware of the fact that the [Turkish] government was not sincere in advancing the peace process, was ensuring its readiness during the cease-fire period in case the process failed.<sup>48</sup>

Turkey-PKK violence has led Turkish authorities to take emergency measures in hopes of pacifying conflict in key southeastern urban areas. This has fueled international concerns about possible human rights abuses.<sup>49</sup> October 10, 2015, suicide bombings—linked by many reports to the Islamic State organization—that killed more than 100 people at a pro-Kurdish rally in Ankara led to renewed nationalistic recriminations and allegations that the government provided insufficient security for the event. The assassination of a prominent Kurdish nationalist figure under disputed circumstances in late November 2015 has further exacerbated nationalistic tensions.<sup>50</sup> In mid-December, the Turkish government deployed thousands of security forces to southeastern Turkey in an apparent attempt to weaken PKK strongholds in various provinces.<sup>51</sup>

U.S. officials, while supportive of Turkey’s prerogative to defend itself from attacks, have advised Turkey to show restraint and proportionality in its actions against the PKK. They also have expressed desires for the parties to resolve their differences peaceably. Many European officials have called for an immediate end to violence and resumption of peace talks.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mustafa Akyol, “What turned Erdogan against the West?,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, February 3, 2015; “Congressional Turkish caucus raps Erdogan for Israel comments,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)*, August 6, 2014; Eli Lake, “Turkish Leader Doubles Down on Blaming Israel for Anti-Semitism,” *Daily Beast*, August 6, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., “Turkey’s AK party: Another victory for illiberalism,” *Economist*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> International Crisis Group, “A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks,” Europe Briefing No. 77, December 17, 2015; Dion Nissenbaum, “Turkish Jets Strike at Kurds,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Ayla Albayrak, “Turkey Steps Up Operations Against Kurdish Rebels,” *Dow Jones Business News*, December 17, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Lale Kemal, “Cease-fire may spoil political game,” *Today’s Zaman*, September 10, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Statement by the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, “Turkey should ensure immediate access to Cizre by independent observers,” September 11, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> “Diyarbakır bar association president Tahir Elçi killed,” *todayozaman.com*, November 28, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Albayrak, op. cit.; Lale Kemal, “Turkey comes close to the brink of civil war,” *Today’s Zaman*, December 17, 2015; “More than 160 PKK terrorists killed in Turkish operation,” *Anadolu Agency*, December 23, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Many Western European countries have sizeable populations of Turkish Kurdish origin (more than a million Kurds live in Europe), and the PKK reportedly maintains a presence in some of these countries as well.

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