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Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief

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Introduction and Assessment

Turkey, a longtime NATO ally, is significant to U.S. interests. It is a constitutional republic with a large, diversified economy and a Muslim-majority population that straddles Europe and the Middle East. The history of the U.S.-Turkey relationship is complicated. Bilateral ties have been particularly strained over the past five years in connection with conflict in Syria and Iraq, increasing domestic contention in Turkey, and the continuing consolidation of power by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym AKP).

In late 2017, several ongoing U.S.-Turkey controversies and persistent anti-American rhetoric among Turkish leaders and media organs have fueled concerns about the future of the bilateral relationship, in parallel with similar problems in Turkey-European Union (EU) relations. Nevertheless, Turkey continues to allow the United States and other members of the coalition assembled to fight the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL or by the Arabic acronym *Daesh*) to use Turkish territory for airstrikes against IS targets.¹

The Erdogan Era

Since Erdogan became prime minister in 2003, he and the ruling AKP have led a process of change in Turkey's parliamentary democracy that has steadily increased the power of Erdogan and other civilian leaders working with him. They have been supported by a substantial political base that largely aligns with decades-long Turkish voter preferences and backs Erdogan's economically populist and religiously informed socially conservative agenda. Analyses of Erdogan sometimes characterize him as one or more of the following: a reflection of the Turkish everyman, a cagey and pragmatic populist, a protector of the vulnerable, a budding authoritarian, an indispensable figure, or an Islamist ideologue.²

Erdogan has worked to reduce the political power of the military and other institutions that had constituted Turkey's secular elite since the republic's founding by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923. He has also clashed with other possible rival power centers, including previous allies of his in the international socioreligious movement inspired by Fethullah Gulen—a former Turkish state-employed imam who lives in the United States. Domestic polarization has intensified since 2013: nationwide antigovernment protests that began in Istanbul's Gezi Park took place that year, and corruption allegations later surfaced against a number of Erdogan's colleagues in and out of government.³ After Erdogan became president in August 2014 via Turkey's first-ever popular presidential election, he claimed a mandate for increasing his power and pursuing a "presidential system" of governance.⁴ Since then, Erdogan's consolidation of power has continued amid a July 2016 coup attempt and an April 2017 constitutional referendum (both discussed below).

There may be some similarities between Turkey under Erdogan and countries characterized as having even more authoritarian leanings, such as Russia, Iran, and China. However, some factors distinguish Turkey from these countries. For example, unlike Russia or Iran, Turkey's economy cannot rely on significant rents from natural resources if foreign sources of revenue or investment dry up. Unlike Russia and China, Turkey does not have nuclear weapons under its command and control. Additionally, unlike all three others, Turkey's economic, political, and national security institutions and traditions have been closely connected with those of the West for decades.

¹ Turkey opened its territory for coalition surveillance flights in 2014 and permitted airstrikes starting in 2015.

² See e.g., Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017; Nora Fisher Onar, "The populism/realism gap: Managing uncertainty in Turkey's politics and foreign policy," Brookings Institution, February 4, 2016; Burak Kadercan, "Erdogan's Last Off-Ramp: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and the Future of Turkey," *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2016.

³ Freedom House, *Democracy in Crisis: Corruption, Media, and Power in Turkey*, February 3, 2014.

⁴ Prior to the constitutional changes approved via popular referendum on April 16, 2017, the presidency was officially nonpartisan and was less directly involved in most governing tasks than the prime minister, and yet Erdogan remained active politically and claimed greater prerogatives of power.

This report provides information and analysis on the issues mentioned above. For more comprehensive background on U.S.-Turkey issues, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

Turkey's Relations with the West

A number of considerations drive the complicated dynamics behind Turkey's relationship with the West. Turkey's history as both a regional power and an object of great power aggression translates into wide popularity for nationalistic political actions and discourse. Given this nationalistic sentiment, Turkey's partial reliance on other key countries (for example, the United States for security, European Union countries for trade, and Russia and Iran for energy) may generate some resentment among Turks. Turkey's maintenance of cooperative relationships with these countries, even while their respective interests may conflict, involves a balancing act. The pressure on Turkey to manage this balance is currently increased by Turkey's vulnerability to threats from Syria and Iraq. Involvement in Syria and Iraq by the United States, Russia, and Iran further complicates Turkey's situation.

Additionally, grievances that President Erdogan and his supporters espouse against seemingly marginalized domestic foes (the military and secular elite who previously dominated Turkey, the Fethullah Gulen movement, Kurdish nationalists, and liberal activists) extend to the United States and Europe due to apparent suspicions of Western links to or sympathies for these foes. In September 2017, Turkish Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli accused several U.S. and German companies of engaging in an undeclared arms embargo. Canikli claimed that these companies are "halting shipments of spare parts of weapons systems to Turkey, or deliberately delaying them."⁵

Current Tensions

United States

Through many challenges to the bilateral relationship since the early Cold War years, both the United States and Turkey have generally indicated that the benefits of their strategic cooperation outweigh drawbacks.⁶ However, a number of controversies that have arisen or intensified in the past two years threaten to worsen bilateral relations, including:

- U.S. support (described in "Syria and the Region" below) for Kurdish fighters in Syria who have links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish acronym PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist group that resumed armed conflict with Turkish government authorities in 2015. This includes U.S. air support from Turkish bases.
- A failed July 2016 coup attempt by a group within Turkey's military. Analysts widely allege that figures with connections to the Gulen movement were involved in the attempt.⁷ Erdogan and other Turkish officials have declared the

⁵ Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey accuses US, Germany of arms embargo," September 25, 2017.

⁶ See, e.g., James Stavridis, "Here's How to Pull Turkey Back From the Brink," Bloomberg, October 20, 2017.

⁷ See, e.g., House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The UK's relations with Turkey*, Tenth Report of Session 2016-17, March 21, 2017, pp. 28-36.

- movement to be a terrorist organization and have called for Gulen's extradition from the United States.⁸
- Russia and Turkey reached a preliminary \$2.5 billion agreement in July 2017 for an advanced air defense system, raising concerns about Turkey's commitment to NATO.⁹ If the deal is finalized,¹⁰ Turkey would reportedly receive two S-400 missile batteries by 2019 and then produce two others domestically.¹¹
 - In a September 2017 letter to President Trump, Senators John McCain and Ben Cardin cited the deal as a possible violation of section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (P.L. 115-44)—relating to transactions with the Russian defense sector—that was enacted on August 2, 2017.¹²
 - In October, the State Department published public guidance acknowledging that transactions covered under P.L. 115-44 will be subject to sanctions starting January 29, 2018, and stated that “the United States intends to work with our allies and partners to help them identify and avoid engaging in potentially sanctionable activity while strengthening military capabilities used for cooperative defense efforts.”¹³
 - An ongoing U.S. court case regarding possible violations of U.S. sanctions against Iran that involves defendant Reza Zarrab and several other Turkish nationals with high-level government connections (see textbox below). In October 2017, Turkish markets were briefly shaken by Turkish media speculation that U.S. authorities may penalize up to six Turkish banks for alleged Iran sanctions violations.¹⁴

⁸ For more on Gulen, the Gulen movement, and the question of possible extradition, see CRS In Focus IF10444, *Fethullah Gulen, Turkey, and the United States: A Reference*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

⁹ In a September 12 press briefing, a State Department spokesperson said that “it’s important for NATO countries to have military equipment that’s considered interoperable with the ... systems that NATO nations currently have. A Russian system, if Turkey were to buy these S-400s, as is being reported, [would] not meet that standard, so that would of course be a concern of ours. It would be inconsistent with the ... commitments made by allies at the Warsaw Summit that [are] supposed to enhance resilience by working to address existing dependencies on Russian-sourced legacy military equipment through some of our national efforts.”

¹⁰ In 2013, Turkey reached a preliminary agreement to purchase a Chinese air and missile defense system, but later (in 2015) withdrew from the deal, at least partly because of concerns voiced within NATO.

¹¹ Ali Unal, “Turkey expanding missile defense capabilities by inking deal with Eurosam,” *dailysabah.com*, November 7, 2017; Bruce Jones and Kerry Herschelman, “Turkey signs deal with France and Italy to build its own anti-ballistic missiles,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, July 18, 2017. Then-serving Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik announced in July that the S-400 deal would “meet Turkey’s urgent requirements,” but also that Turkey anticipates cultivating a more long-term missile defense relationship with the French-Italian consortium Eurosam in the wake of a preliminary Turkey-Eurosam deal on joint research, development, and production. Jones and Herschelman, *op. cit.* In November 2017, Turkey signed a letter of intent with France and Italy to begin a two-year feasibility study, with a decision on potential joint production anticipated to happen by 2019 and initial production possible by 2025. Unal, *op. cit.*

¹² Richard Lardner, “Senators Urge Trump to Robustly Enforce Russia Sanctions Law,” *Associated Press*, September 29, 2017.

¹³ State Department, *Public Guidance on Sanctions with Respect to Russia’s Defense and Intelligence Sectors Under Section 231 of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017*, October 27, 2017.

¹⁴ Tugce Ozsoy and Asli Kandemir, “Turkey Markets Shaken by Unsubstantiated U.S. Probe Report,” *Bloomberg*, October 23, 2017.

- General concerns regarding deterioration of Turkey’s rule of law, media freedom, and democratic integrity (see “Domestic Turkish Developments” below), especially in association with the government’s response to the failed coup.
- Turkey’s detention of a number of U.S. citizens,¹⁵ including Christian pastor Andrew Brunson,¹⁶ and statements from Erdogan implying that Brunson could be returned to the United States in exchange for Gulen.¹⁷
- Turkey’s detention of two Turkish nationals employed by U.S. diplomatic installations and investigation of a third. U.S. officials responded in October 2017 by freezing the issuance of U.S. entry visas at diplomatic facilities in Turkey, and Turkey responded in kind amid harsh rhetoric on both sides.¹⁸ In November 2017, both sides resumed “limited” visa services.¹⁹
- An incident during Erdogan’s May 2017 visit to Washington, DC, in which members of his security detail appear to have assaulted individuals protesting near the Turkish ambassador’s residence.²⁰ In response, some Members of Congress voiced opposition to a proposed U.S. sale of small arms to Turkey’s presidential protection detail.²¹ The Trump Administration withdrew the proposed sale from consideration in September, drawing criticism from Erdogan.

¹⁵ The Senate-reported version of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2018 (S. 1780) has a provision [section 7046(e)] that would—based on credible information—require the Administration to identify senior Turkish officials “knowingly responsible for the wrongful or unlawful prolonged detention of citizens or nationals of the United States,” report to Congress about them, and possibly deny them entry into the United States (subject to a waiver on the grounds of U.S. national interest).

¹⁶ Brunson, who has long served as a pastor in Izmir, was detained in October 2016 and charged in December 2016 with membership in a terrorist organization, reportedly due to claimed but undocumented ties to the Gulen movement. Brunson was charged with additional offenses, including espionage, in August 2017. Nour Malas, et al., “Turkey Ups Ante in U.S. Pastor’s Detention,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2017. On February 15, 2017, 78 Members of Congress sent a letter to President Erdogan calling for Brunson’s release and return.

¹⁷ “Turkey’s Erdogan links fate of detained U.S. pastor to wanted cleric Gulen,” Reuters, September 28, 2017. In a September 28 State Department press briefing, a spokesperson indicated that she could not “imagine” the Administration pursuing such an exchange.

¹⁸ Carlotta Gall, “‘We Did Not Start This’: Erdogan Blames U.S. Ambassador for Visa Dispute,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2017.

¹⁹ State Department, Limited Resumption of Visa Services in Turkey, November 6, 2017. Turkish statement available at <https://twitter.com/TurkishEmbassy/status/927576303242498049>. The State Department statement said that Turkey had provided assurances to guard against the arrest of locals employed by the U.S. government if those locals are carrying out their official duties or if Turkish authorities do not inform U.S. officials in advance. The same day, the Turkish embassy in Washington, DC, said that “Turkey is a state of law and our government cannot provide any assurances regarding files that are subject of ongoing legal processes.” “Turkey denies assuring US over cases against suspects in visa spat,” *dailysabah.com*, November 6, 2017. The State Department statement said that U.S. officials would continue to engage with Turkish counterparts to seek a “satisfactory resolution” of existing cases against arrested local employees and U.S. citizens arrested under the state of emergency.

²⁰ Malachy Brown, et al., “Did the Turkish President’s Security Detail Attack Protesters in Washington? What the Video Shows,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2017. Criminal charges were later filed against a number of Turkish security personnel, some of whose visas were revoked, leading the Turkish government to summon the U.S. ambassador in protest; 19 individuals, including 15 guards, were indicted in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia in connection with the incident in August 2017. Erdogan denounced the indictment. That event, in which nine individuals were injured, marked the third incident of violence or heated contention on U.S. soil involving President Erdogan’s security detail. Turkish security clashed with protestors outside an Erdogan speech at the Brookings Institution in March 2016, and with U.N. guards during the September 2011 U.N. General Assembly general debate in New York.

²¹ Section 7046(d) of S. 1780 would prohibit the use of funds for U.S. arms transfers or provision of defense services to the Turkish Presidential Protection Directorate (with exceptions for border security and NATO and anti-IS operations) unless the Administration could certify that Turkey is taking certain steps with respect to rule of law and human rights.

- Regular anti-American content from Turkey's pro-government media, much of which accuses U.S. officials or institutions of trying to undermine Turkey, including through involvement in the failed coup and supporting Kurdish independence.²²

U.S. Court Case on Iran Sanctions: Connections to Turkey²³

A federal court case in the Southern District of New York has been ongoing since shortly after the March 2016 arrest of Reza Zarrab, a gold trader and dual Turkish-Iranian citizen accused of involvement in a conspiracy to violate U.S. sanctions against Iran. In March 2017, Mehmet Hakan Atilla (a manager for Halkbank, a Turkish bank that is majority-owned by the government) was arrested in New York and charged with conspiring with Zarrab. In September 2017, prosecutors indicted four additional Turkish citizens in absentia, including former Turkish economy minister Zafer Caglayan and two other employees of Halkbank. A total of nine people have been charged in the case, with Zarrab and Atilla in custody.

Zarrab retained former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani as part of his legal team in hopes of negotiating a diplomatic resolution to the case. Giuliani met with President Erdogan in connection with these efforts. Erdogan has regularly criticized the case, and specifically denounced the indictment against Caglayan as a "step against the Turkish state." U.S. investigators used the findings of 2013 documents from Turkish prosecutors whom Erdogan has accused of seeking to undermine his government in connection with the Gulen movement.

An October 2017 media column alleged that Erdogan vigorously sought Zarrab's release while President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden were in office. The column also speculated about possible links between Turkish arrests of U.S. citizens and employees and Erdogan's apparent interest in having Zarrab released before his trial, which is currently scheduled to begin on November 27. Conjecture about the alleged bribery scheme involving Zarrab is that it could implicate Erdogan or others close to him.²⁴ One November 2017 media report cited evidence that Zarrab might be preparing a guilty plea and raised the question of whether he might cooperate with those investigating and prosecuting the case.²⁵

In the midst of a number of these controversies, President Trump met with Erdogan in September on the sidelines of the annual commencement of the U.N. General Assembly in New York. Trump praised Erdogan as a friend who gets "high marks" for "running a very difficult part of the world."²⁶ In an October 24 letter to President Trump, 14 Senators urged him to tell Erdogan that recent Turkish actions will not be tolerated "and that any cooperation must be based on a shared commitment to human rights and rule of law."²⁷

²² See, e.g., Aaron Stein, "Managing Tensions and Options to Engage," Atlantic Council, November 2017.

²³ Much of the material in the first two paragraphs of this textbox is drawn from Benjamin Weiser, "U.S. Expands Case Against Turks Over Iran," *New York Times*, September 7, 2017; Nour Malas and Erdem Aydin, "Indictment Draws Turkish Rebuke," *Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 2017; and Patrick Kingsley and Benjamin Weiser, "Signs of Possible Guilty Plea in Turkish Gold Trader Case," *New York Times*, November 1, 2017.

²⁴ David Ignatius, "The man at the crux of the U.S.-Turkey dispute is about to go on trial," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2017.

²⁵ Kingsley and Weiser, op. cit.

²⁶ Margaret Talev and Jennifer Jacobs, "Trump Praises Erdogan for 'High Marks' Amid Crackdown Concerns," Bloomberg, September 21, 2017.

²⁷ The letter is available at https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/fad0dd73-6eeb-4233-af6f-2c032cc5db10/mccain-menendez-letter-to-president-trump-re-turkey-s-edrogan-10-25-17.pdf. Four other Senators and six Representatives sent a separate letter directly to Erdogan (dated October 16) on rule of law and human rights concerns, with specific focus on U.S. citizens and employees being detained by Turkish officials. See <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/20171016%20-%20Helsinki%20Comm%20Letter%20to%20President%20Erdogan%20-%20FINAL.pdf>.

Europe

Relations between Turkey and some EU states have also become more strained in 2017, despite a Turkey-EU agreement in 2016 that has contributed to reducing refugee arrivals in Europe.²⁸ Germany, the EU's largest economy and home to the most people of Turkish origin in Europe (roughly four million), is a focal point of these tensions. With relations already frayed due to Turkey's stalemated EU accession prospects and friction over Erdogan's consolidation of power, they worsened in 2017 over a number of issues. These include German (and some other European countries') restrictions on Turkish rallies connected to the April constitutional referendum, an Erdogan reference to Dutch authorities as "Nazi remnants,"²⁹ and Turkey's detention of German nationals who included a journalist and a human rights activist.³⁰ Also, in June 2017, Germany's government decided to relocate a detachment of German troops and surveillance and refueling aircraft from Turkey's Incirlik air base to Jordan after Turkey refused to allow German parliamentary members to visit the detachment. Turkish officials explained their action as a response to German grants of asylum to Turkish military personnel suspected in the July 2016 coup plot.³¹

During Germany's electoral campaign in September, Chancellor Angela Merkel said that she would seek an end to Turkey's EU accession talks. After the election, Merkel said in October that "there is no majority [among EU leaders] for breaking off the talks immediately," though there is a "great deal of skepticism about the current situation." Merkel has recommended that the European Commission make recommendations on changing and reducing pre-accession aid to Turkey,³² which currently totals more than \$600 million annually.³³ While the EU might not formally terminate Turkey's accession process, Turkey reportedly seeks a "modernization" of Turkey's existing customs union with the EU, and ongoing Turkey-Germany tensions may delay or endanger any such efforts.³⁴

U.S./NATO Cooperation with Turkey: Background and Assessment

Turkey's location near several global hotspots makes the continuing availability of its territory for the stationing and transport of arms, cargo, and personnel valuable for the United States and NATO. NATO's traditional value for Turkey has been to help mitigate the concerns about security it has from surrounding geopolitical dangers. Turkey turned to the West largely as a reaction to aggressive post-World War II posturing by the Soviet Union.

²⁸ For more information on the 2016 agreement, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

²⁹ "Turkey's Erdogan calls Dutch authorities 'Nazi remnants,'" BBC News, March 11, 2017.

³⁰ See, e.g., Andrea Shalal and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Germany's Merkel blasts Turkey's arrest of human rights activists," Reuters, July 18, 2017; "Report: 18 Germans detained in Turkey since coup attempt," *Deutsche Welle*, April 21, 2017. The activist was released in October. Carlotta Gall, "Turkish Court Releases 8 Human Rights Workers in a Surprise Move," *New York Times*, October 26, 2017.

³¹ "Turkey Refuses to Back Down in Feud with Germany," *New York Times*, July 22, 2017; Julian E. Barnes and Emre Peker, "Political Rift Poses Risk for NATO," *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2017.

³² Robin Emmott and Noah Barkin, "Merkel presses allies to cut funds for Turkey's EU bid," October 19, 2017.

³³ European Commission, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II): Indicative Strategy Paper for Turkey (2014-2020), available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2014/20140919-csp-turkey.pdf.

³⁴ Suat Kiniklioglu, "Turkey and the West: How Bad Is It?" *Turkey Analyst*, October 13, 2017.

On a number of occasions throughout the history of the U.S.-Turkey alliance, the United States has withdrawn military assets from Turkey and Turkey has restricted U.S. use of its territory and/or airspace.³⁵ Calculating the costs and benefits to the United States of a U.S./NATO presence in Turkey, and of potential changes in U.S./NATO posture, revolves to a significant extent around the following two questions:

- To what extent does the United States rely on the use of Turkish territory or airspace to secure and protect U.S. interests?
- To what extent does Turkey rely on U.S./NATO support, both in principle and in functional terms, for its security and its ability to exercise influence in the surrounding region?

Incirlik Air Base

Turkey's Incirlik (pronounced *een-jeer-leek*) air base in the southern part of the country has long been the symbolic and logistical center of the U.S. military presence in Turkey. Since 1991, the base has been critical in supplying U.S. military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The United States's 39th Air Base Wing is based at Incirlik. Turkey opened its territory for anti-IS coalition surveillance flights in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and permitted airstrikes starting in 2015. At various points in the anti-IS effort, the United States has reportedly deployed F-16s, F-15s, A-10s, EA-6B Prowlers, and KC-135 tankers at Incirlik. U.S. Predator drones based at Incirlik had reportedly flown unarmed reconnaissance missions for some time before 2014 to help Turkey counter the PKK in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.³⁶ Predators (both unarmed and armed) have also reportedly flown anti-ISIS missions. In the past year, the number of U.S. forces at the base has been reported at around 2,500. Before anti-IS operations, U.S. troop levels were generally reported to be between 1,500 and 2,000. Turkey's 10th Tanker Base Command (utilizing KC-135 tankers) is also based at Incirlik.

Turkey continues to allow the United States and other members of the coalition that have assembled to fight the Islamic State to use Turkish territory for airstrikes against IS targets. However, at least one media source has reported that Turkey has obstructed some deliveries of jet fuel to coalition planes supporting YPG-led forces in Syria.³⁷ Dependents of U.S. military and government personnel were ordered to leave Incirlik and other U.S. installations in Turkey in March 2016.³⁸

Effects from some of the July 2016 coup plotters' apparent use of Incirlik air base temporarily disrupted U.S. military operations, raising questions about Turkey's stability and the safety and utility of Turkish territory for U.S. and NATO assets, including the reported storage of around 50 aircraft-deliverable nuclear weapons at Incirlik.³⁹ Some observers have advocated exploring alternative basing arrangements in the region.⁴⁰ Turkey maintains the right to cancel U.S. access to Incirlik with three days' notice.

The cost to the United States of finding a temporary or permanent replacement for Incirlik air base would likely depend on variables including the functionality and location of alternatives, the location of future U.S. military engagements, and the political and economic difficulty involved in moving or expanding U.S. military operations elsewhere.

³⁵ For more information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

³⁶ U.S. officials reportedly are discussing upgrading efforts to share intelligence and to help Turkey target PKK targets in Iraq. Amberin Zaman, "Mattis pledges Erdogan US support against PKK," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, August 23, 2017.

³⁷ Zaman, "Mattis pledges Erdogan US support against PKK," *op. cit.*

³⁸ Andrew Tilghman, "U.S. Military Dependents Ordered to Leave Turkey," *Military Times*, March 29, 2016.

³⁹ Dan Lamothe, "The U.S. stores nuclear weapons in Turkey. Is that such a good idea?" *washingtonpost.com*, July 19, 2016.

⁴⁰ Testimony of Steven Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing, September 6, 2017; John Cappello, et al., "Covering the Bases: Reassessing U.S. Military Deployments in Turkey After the July 2016 Attempted Coup d'Etat," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 2016.

Any reevaluation of the U.S./NATO presence in and relationship with Turkey would take a number of political considerations into account alongside strategic and operational ones. Certain differences between Turkey and its NATO allies may persist irrespective of who leads these countries given their varying geographical positions, threat perceptions, and roles in regional and global political and security architectures.

Turkish Moves Toward Russia and Iran?

Some analysts posit that given geopolitical realities involving Syria and increasing public contention between Turkey's leaders and the West, Erdogan may opt to seek closer relations with Russia.⁴¹ Some observers speculate that a "Eurasianist" faction has gained ascendancy in Turkey's military following the failed coup at the expense of "Atlanticists," with the Eurasianists apparently favoring strengthened ties with Russia, Iran, and even China.⁴²

However, Turkey has a long history of tension with Russia.⁴³ Turkey-Russia relations were strained in November 2015 when a Turkish F-16 downed a Russian Su-24 aircraft near the Turkey-Syria border under disputed circumstances. After taking some initial steps toward repairing relations in June 2016, in advance of launching military operations in Syria in August 2016, Turkish officials reportedly consulted with Russian officials—in part to deconflict airspace—before launching military operations in Syria in August 2016.⁴⁴

Some observers assert that Russia opportunistically supports Kurds in Turkey and Syria in order to influence Turkish regional policy.⁴⁵ Russia's preliminary agreement to sell Turkey an S-400 air and missile defense system (discussed above) may be an effort to place a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies. Additionally, Turkey depends on Russia for a majority of its natural gas supply, and a Russian company is constructing Turkey's first nuclear power plant.

By making a decision independent of the United States to launch military operations in Syria in late 2016 (discussed more below), Turkey may have moved toward a more flexible stance regarding (1) outcomes in Syria and Iraq and (2) actors it can work with to achieve those outcomes. Turkey maintains some sizeable policy disagreements with Russia and Iran, even while engaging with both countries to influence regional outcomes. For example, greater Iranian influence in the region via Iran's Alawite and Shia allies in Syria and Iraq could come at the expense of a Turkish sphere of influence in both countries.⁴⁶

A Turkey-Russia-Iran agreement on "de-escalation areas" in Syria, announced in May 2017, may reflect Turkish interest in finding ways to reduce refugee-producing conflict.⁴⁷ As a possible result of this diplomacy, Turkey might claim greater freedom of action in areas closer to its

⁴¹ See, e.g., Moira Goff-Taylor, "Why Turkey Needs Russia," Wilson Center, September 7, 2017.

⁴² Yaroslav Trofimov, "Turkey-U.S. Clash Emboldens Russia and Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2017; Cengiz Candar, "Current crisis could ignite long-smoldering US-Turkey relations," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, October 16, 2017; Stein, op. cit.

⁴³ Soner Cagaptay, "When Russia Howls, Turkey Moves," *War on the Rocks*, December 2, 2015.

⁴⁴ "Turkey needed detente with Russia to pursue Syria operation: minister," Reuters, November 30, 2016.

⁴⁵ Cagaptay, *Sultan*, op. cit., chapter 11; Zulfikar Dogan, "Kurdish rift emerges between Erdogan, Putin," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, November 6, 2017.

⁴⁶ "What is behind the hostility between Iran and Turkey?" Al Jazeera, February 26, 2017.

⁴⁷ Turkey had previously sought U.S. assistance to establish "safe zones" in Syria, but U.S. officials had expressed reluctance, based largely on logistical and geopolitical uncertainties regarding which state or nonstate actors would contribute to air and ground forces, and what parameters would govern such forces' deployment.

border, where it seeks to halt and perhaps reverse gains made by Syrian Kurdish groups,⁴⁸ while easing its support for rebels opposing the Syrian regime—especially in other parts of the country.⁴⁹

Some reports have suggested possible Iranian willingness to make common cause with Turkey against PKK elements in the region, specifically in Iraq.⁵⁰ Shared Turkey-Iran opposition to the September 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum may strengthen cooperative efforts to limit the effects of Kurdish nationalism in the region and to strengthen the Iraqi central government's control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas.

Syria and the Region

Turkey's military incursion across the border into IS-controlled areas of northern Syria began in August 2016. Turkish military forces have provided air and artillery support for Turkish armored vehicles and special forces, and for ground forces drawn from Syrian Arab and Turkmen units nominally associated with "Free Syrian Army" (FSA) opposition to the Syrian regime. Some of these FSA-affiliated units have reportedly received additional external support from Gulf Arab and Western sources. Turkish leaders declared initial operations (also known as Operation Euphrates Shield) to be complete in March 2017, but Turkey continues to provide cross-border support to allied Syrian forces, and has also inserted troops directly into areas of Idlib province.⁵¹ Turkish officials have routinely speculated about expanding operations into other, Kurdish-held parts of Syria.⁵²

One of the Turkish operation's main objectives has been to prevent Kurdish fighters within YPG-led units from indefinitely controlling areas between the Kurdish-controlled cantons of Afrin (in the west) and Kobane (in the east). Since 2014, the United States has openly assisted Kurdish militias in Syria (known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG) who are fighting the Islamic State but have links with the PKK. The YPG plays a leading role in the U.S.-partnered umbrella group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also includes Arabs and other non-Kurdish elements. In May 2017, U.S. officials announced a decision to arm YPG elements directly to counter the Islamic State, while contemplating measures to limit the prospect of YPG use of U.S.-provided arms against Turkey.⁵³

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Amberin Zaman, "US move to protect YPG could push Turkey into Russia's arms," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, May 1, 2017.

⁴⁹ Aaron Stein, quoted in Max Fisher, "Turkey, Russia and an Assassination: The Swirling Crises, Explained," *New York Times*, December 19, 2016; Soner Cagaptay, quoted in Fritz Lodge and Mackenzie Weinger, "An Extremely Vulnerable Turkey," *Cipher Brief*, December 20, 2016.

⁵⁰ Ahmad Majidiyar, "Turkey's 'Three Options' in Idlib amid Growing Tehran-Ankara Cooperation," Middle East Institute, August 23, 2017; Ali Hashem, "Iran, Turkey move to re-establish role as regional backbone," *Al-Monitor Iran Pulse*, August 23, 2017.

⁵¹ Charles Lister, "Turkey's Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, October 31, 2017.

⁵² See, e.g., "Turkish military's Idlib operation almost completed, next is Afrin: Erdoğan," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 24, 2017.

⁵³ Pentagon statement quoted in Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects," *New York Times*, May 9, 2017; Anne Barnard and Patrick Kingsley, "Arming Syrian Kurds Could Come at a Cost," *New York Times*, May 11, 2017. The Pentagon statement sought to reassure Turkey that "the U.S. is committed to preventing additional risks and protecting our NATO ally." It further said, "The U.S. continues to prioritize our support for Arab elements of the SDF. Raqqa and all liberated territory should return to the governance of local Syrian Arabs." To date, U.S. officials have not equated the YPG with the PKK as Turkey does. Gordon Lubold, et (continued...)

Turkey appears to view the YPG as the top threat to its security, given the operational and moral support its military and political success could provide to the PKK's insurgency within Turkey.⁵⁴ At the same time, the United States has partnered with the YPG because—with the possible exception of certain forces aligned with the Syrian regime—it has arguably been the most successful anti-IS ground force in Syria.⁵⁵ During an August 2017 visit to Turkey, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis reportedly discussed assisting Turkey with intelligence on possible PKK targets in Iraq, including the PKK's longtime safe haven in the Qandil Mountains near the Iranian border, and an outpost in the northwestern area of Sinjar that the PKK has built up over the past two years.⁵⁶

Figure 1. Turkey-Syria Border: Contested Territorial Areas



Sources: Areas of influence based on data from IHS Conflict Monitor, and adapted by CRS based on media accounts. Other sources include UN OCHA and Esri.

Going forward, it is unclear

- to what extent Turkish-supported forces will hold their positions and/or advance farther in Syrian territory, either with or without U.S. support;
- what rules of engagement Turkey might establish and coordinate with various state and non-state actors and local populations for administering areas occupied inside Syria by forces Turkey supports; and

(...continued)

al., “U.S., Turkey Boost Antiterror Cooperation,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2017. See also CRS Report R44513, *Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State*, coordinated by Jim Zanotti. For information on U.S. authorities to train and equip select armed Syrian groups to fight the Islamic State, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud.

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, Middle East Report No. 176, May 4, 2017.

⁵⁵ Liz Sly, “U.S. Military Aid Is Fueling Big Ambitions for Syria’s Leftist Kurdish Militia,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2017.

⁵⁶ Amberin Zaman, “Mattis pledges Erdogan US support against PKK,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, August 23, 2017.

- how Turkey might connect its military operations to its political objectives regarding broader outcomes in Syria, Iraq, and the region, and to its dealings with other key stakeholders, including Russia, Iran, and the Asad regime.

Following the October 2017 capture of Raqqa from IS forces, observers speculate about how long U.S. support for the YPG will persist, given its impact on U.S.-Turkey relations. On October 31, Major General James Jarrard, commander of Special Operations Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, said:

[W]hat I can say is that we are committed to support the SDF through the military defeat of Daesh. The liberation of Daesh from areas on the east and west—on the east and north side of the Euphrates River is the first step.

But there's a long process after that: making sure that we have the security in place, the stabilization efforts in place to allow [internally displaced persons] to return home -- that is all part of the military defeat of Daesh, making sure that we treat the symptoms that allowed Daesh to take over this area in the first place.

And we are committed to supporting the SDF throughout that process.⁵⁷

General Jarrard cited close cooperation among the Kurdish and non-Kurdish elements of the SDF in both military operations and efforts to transition to post-conflict administration, with significant Arab leadership in majority-Arab-populated areas.⁵⁸ However, various media reports assert that tensions between YPG and Arab figures affect security and governance in SDF-held areas of northern Syria, with the potential to become more problematic for all parties involved, including the United States and Turkey.⁵⁹

Domestic Turkish Developments

Erdogan's Control: Implications for Rule of Law and Human Rights

Over almost 15 years, President (and formerly Prime Minister) Erdogan has increased his control over key national institutions, including the military⁶⁰ and Turkey's national intelligence agency.⁶¹ The Turkish parliament voted within days of the July 2016 coup attempt to approve a three-month state of emergency, and has extended it every three months since, most recently on October 17, 2017. This allows the government to rule by decree. Turkey also partially suspended the

⁵⁷ Transcript of Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Jarrard via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, October 31, 2017.

⁵⁸ Briefing by General Jarrard, op. cit.

⁵⁹ Daniel Wilkofsky and Khalid Fatah, "Northern Syria's Anti-Islamic State Coalition Has an Arab Problem," *War on the Rocks*, September 18, 2017; John Davison and Tom Perry, "Analysis: After victory in Raqqa over IS, Kurds face tricky peace," Reuters, October 17, 2017.

⁶⁰ Lars Haugom, "The Turkish Armed Forces Restructured," *Turkey Analyst*, September 30, 2016.

⁶¹ Lars Haugom, "The Turkish Armed Forces Restructured," *Turkey Analyst*, September 30, 2016; Danny Orbach, "What Coup-Proofing Will do to Turkey's Military: Lesson from Five Countries," *War on the Rocks*, September 27, 2016. Responsibility for oversight of the National Intelligence Organization (Turkish acronym MIT) was formally transferred from the prime minister to the president by a presidential decree in August 2017. Zia Weise, "Erdogan tightens grip on intelligence agency," *Politico*, August 25, 2017.

European Convention on Human Rights, citing examples from France, Belgium, and Ukraine as precedents.⁶²

Trends Under Erdogan/AKP Rule

During Turkey's initial years of rule under Erdogan and the AKP, vigorous debate took place regarding Turkey's political and economic trajectory and its leaders' commitment to democracy, free markets, institutional stability, and pluralism. After the AKP's third electoral victory in 2011, and especially after domestic contention increased in 2013 in association with public protests and corruption charges, Turkey experienced

- major personnel and structural changes to the justice sector and the widespread dropping of charges or convictions against Erdogan colleagues and military leaders amid government accusations that the Gulen movement had used its own agenda to drive police and prosecutorial actions and was intent on establishing a "parallel structure" to control Turkey;⁶³
- efforts by officials or their associates to influence media expression through intimidation, personnel changes, prosecution, and even direct takeover of key enterprises;⁶⁴
- various measures to prevent future protests, including robust police action, restrictions on social media, and official and pro-government media allegations that dissent in Turkey largely comes about through the interaction of small minorities and foreign interests;⁶⁵
- changes in other AKP-led government positions reflecting greater overall deference to Erdogan;⁶⁶ and
- U.S. and European statements of concern regarding Turkish measures targeting civil liberties and the potential for developments that may undermine the rule of law and political and economic stability.⁶⁷

Many of these trends have expanded or accelerated in the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt and April 2017 constitutional referendum.⁶⁸

According to an October 2017 estimate, around 150,000 Turks have been fired from government posts since July 2016, and 60,000 people have been arrested.⁶⁹ Sources indicate that the government's actions have affected individuals and organizations—including several members of the media⁷⁰—beyond those connected to the coup attempt.⁷¹ Legal due process and respect for prisoners' rights have come under question as well.⁷² Additionally, in October 2017, a former AKP member of parliament wrote:

⁶² "Turkish Lawmakers Give Leader Erdogan Sweeping New Powers," Associated Press, July 21, 2016.

⁶³ Piotr Zalewski, "Erdogan Turns on Gulenists' 'Parallel State' in Battle for Power," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2014.

⁶⁴ State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016, Turkey, updated March 3, 2017; "Turkey's Zaman: Editorial Tone Changes after Takeover," Al Jazeera, March 7, 2016.

⁶⁵ Lisel Hintz, "Adding Insult to Injury: Vilification as Counter-Mobilization in Turkey's Gezi Protests," Project on Middle East Political Science, June 6, 2016.

⁶⁶ Reuben Silverman, "Some of the President's Men: Yildirim, Davutoglu, and the 'Palace Coup' Before the Coup," reubensilverman.wordpress.com, August 1, 2016.

⁶⁷ State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016, op. cit.; European Commission, Turkey 2016 Report, November 9, 2016, available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_turkey.pdf.

⁶⁸ Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey Purges 4,000 More Officials, and Blocks Wikipedia," *New York Times*, April 30, 2017.

⁶⁹ "Too many kooks," *Economist*, October 26, 2017. The firings span several government sectors, including the military, law enforcement, education, and the judiciary.

⁷⁰ See <https://rsf.org/en/turkey> and <https://cpj.org/blog/europe/turkey/>; Freedom House, "Turkey: Court Conviction of Reporter Criminalizes Journalism," October 11, 2017.

⁷¹ Gareth Jenkins, "Sounds, Silences and Turkey's Crumbling Core," *Turkey Analyst*, September 19, 2017; Kingsley, op. cit.; Human Rights Watch, "Civil Society on Trial in Turkey," October 27, 2017.

⁷² Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2017*, "Turkey." See also Human Rights Watch, *In Custody: Police Torture and Abductions in Turkey*, October 12, 2017.

Apart from the total suspension of the rule of law and the separation of powers, a determined drive to undo Turkey's secular heritage is underway. This manifests itself in the form of a new school curriculum that is considerably more religious if not outright Islamist, the attempt to separate the sexes in public life, a smart and equally intense Islamist-nationalist propaganda effort through television and other media, attacks on the legacy of the founder of the secular Turkish Republic, the creation of new foundational myths, and an all-encompassing climate that dictates an authoritarian conservative-nationalist narrative of the "New Turkey."⁷³

Economic Issues

During the ongoing state of emergency, Turkey's economy has experienced fluctuations. After the July 2016 coup attempt, there were declines in production, investment, and domestic demand, along with heightened risk assessments from international credit rating agencies. A government crackdown against companies deemed to have connections to the Gulen movement—reportedly resulting in at least \$11 billion of seized assets—contributed to concerns regarding the rule of law.⁷⁴ Global conditions for emerging market economies improved in early 2017, reportedly aiding Turkey as well.⁷⁵ In October 2017, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) revised anticipated 2017 real GDP growth for Turkey up to 5.1% (from an April estimate of 3.0%), due in part to a recovery in exports and in part to fiscal stimulus from the government.⁷⁶ As of November 2017, Turkey's currency (the lira) has depreciated against the dollar by around 25% since the coup attempt.

April 2017 Constitutional Referendum and Future Implementation

In an April 16, 2017, nationwide referendum, constitutional changes to establish a "presidential system" in Turkey were adopted via a 51.4% favorable vote. The changes alter the country's system of governance to an extent that possibly represents a pivotal moment for the future of democracy in Turkey.⁷⁷ Most of the changes are to take effect after Turkey's next presidential and parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for November 2019, but could take place earlier if parliament calls for them. Among other changes to government structure and the electoral system, the amendments are to

- eliminate the position of prime minister, with the president serving as both chief executive and head of state;
- allow the president to appoint ministers without parliamentary approval; and
- increase the proportion of senior judges chosen by the president from about half to over two thirds.

⁷³ Kiniklioglu, op. cit.

⁷⁴ Mustafa Sonmez, "One year on, Turkey's coup attempt has impacted economy," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, July 7, 2017; Mehul Srivastava, "Assets worth \$11bn seized in Turkey crackdown," *Financial Times*, July 7, 2017; "Turkey's Purges Are Hitting Its Business Class," *Economist*, February 4, 2017.

⁷⁵ Sonmez, op. cit.

⁷⁶ IMF, *World Economic Outlook*, October 2017.

⁷⁷ Some observers have drawn a link between Erdogan's growing authoritarianism at home and an increasingly divisive series of developments in Turkish foreign policy. Aykan Erdemir and Merve Tahiroglu, "Turkey's Patchwork Foreign Policy: Between Islamism and Pragmatism," *Foreign Affairs*, July 5, 2017.

The contentious campaign and close vote, accompanied by allegations of fraud and other irregularities, arguably deepened Turkish societal instability.⁷⁸ Additionally, some outside observers expressed skepticism about the vote's legitimacy.⁷⁹

When, how, and by whom the constitutional amendments are to be implemented remains unclear. Erdogan has dominated Turkish electoral politics since 2002 and it is uncertain whether viable opposition could materialize in the next two years. Under the changes, Erdogan can run for two additional five-year terms, and if he were to run and win in 2019 and 2024, an early election before the end of the second term in 2029 could extend his term for another five years. However, his dominance could change if key constituencies' attitudes shift as a result of political or economic developments. Some observers assert that the reportedly forced resignation of several Turkish mayors in late 2017 reflects an effort by Erdogan to freshen the AKP's popular appeal ahead of the municipal elections that are scheduled (in March 2019) to precede the November national elections.⁸⁰

Government Policy Toward Kurds

Under the post-coup-attempt state of emergency, Turkey's government has cracked down on domestic political opponents. A primary focus, in addition to the Gulen movement, appears to be Turkey's Kurdish minority. Heightened ethnic Turkish-Kurdish tensions predated the attempted coup, having been exacerbated since mid-2015 by renewed conflict between government forces and the PKK.⁸¹ Key Kurdish political leaders have been imprisoned since late 2016.⁸² Additionally, dozens of elected Kurdish mayors have been removed from office and replaced with government-appointed "custodians."⁸³ Turkish officials routinely accuse Kurdish politicians of support for the PKK, but these politicians generally deny ties of a criminal nature.

The future trajectory of Turkey-PKK violence and political negotiation may depend on a number of factors, including the extent to which the United States and European actors offer incentives to or impose costs on Turkey and the PKK in efforts to mitigate violence and promote political resolution of the parties' differences.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Cengiz Candar, "Where does Erdogan's referendum win leave Turkey?" *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, April 17, 2017.

⁷⁹ Election observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Parliamentary Assembly for the Council of Europe produced a report criticizing the electoral board for counting unstamped ballots and addressing other concerns. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Turkey: Constitution Referendum, 16 April 2017: Final Report," June 22, 2017. Available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/324816>.

⁸⁰ Semih Idiz, "Erdogan's concerns for 2019," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 24, 2017; "Too many kooks," *op. cit.*

⁸¹ See, e.g., International Crisis Group, *Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin*, Europe Report No. 243, May 2, 2017; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Reports on the Human Rights Situation in South-East Turkey: July 2015 to December 2016," February 2017.

⁸² Ayla Jean Yackley, "One year into crackdown, Turkey's pro-Kurdish opposition battered but defiant," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, November 6, 2017. Selahattin Demirtas, the prominent co-leader of Turkey's pro-Kurdish opposition party (Peoples' Democratic Party, or Turkish acronym HDP), was convicted in February 2017 for insulting the Turkish state and nation and its institutions. The other co-leader, Fiden Yuksekdog, has been expelled from parliament and criminally convicted. Both face a string of other terrorism-related allegations. Ece Toksabay, "Turkey's pro-Kurdish party leader refuses to attend court in handcuffs: party," Reuters, July 7, 2017; Umar Farooq, "As Erdogan Consolidates Power in Turkey, the Kurdish Opposition Faces Crackdown," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2017; Hilal Koylu, "Lawyer for jailed HDP politician Yuksekdog in Turkey: independent verdict would be a 'miracle,'" *Deutsche Welle*, July 5, 2017.

⁸³ "Too many kooks," *op. cit.*

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