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TURKEY-US RELATIONS: FROM BAD TO WORSE TO BETTER?

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Now is a time of political upheaval in both Turkey and the US, so it is no surprise that many American think tanks are once again assessing the turbulent state of Turkish-US relations. Although these two allies have shared strategic interests for decades, relations between Turkey and the US have been on a downward trajectory for years, and some pundits have begun to ask whether this deterioration could worsen and lead to a total rupture. Such a dire scenario, once unimaginable, seemed possible in October 2018. Outraged by Turkey's continued detention of American pastor Andrew Brunson on dubious charges that he collaborated with terrorists, US President Donald Trump apparently considered an unprecedented plan to remove all US personnel in Turkey over a period of 60 days. US-based ABC news, which reported the story on October 14, 2018, quoted a senior US State Department official expressing the 'fear of an apocalyptic break in relations with Turkey'.¹ The standoff ended when Turkey released Brunson a few days later, to the relief of many high-level American and Turkish officials.² This act has ushered in a period of calm between the two allies and renewed hopes among officials in both countries that they can begin to resolve the issues that have bedeviled their relations for some time.

A New Turkey: The Rise of Erdogan

Any review of contemporary international relations involving Turkey must start with that country's dominant political figure: Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Since his party assumed power in 2002, Erdogan helped bring about extraordinary changes to his country. Although famous for his fiery rhetoric, he has also shown himself to be shrewd and calculating, often achieving his lofty aspirations by adopting a series of smaller, incremental changes. At

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<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-called-plan-remove-us-diplomatsturkey-frustration/story?id=58490758>

² Turkey continues to detain an American with dual Turkish-US citizenship and two Turkish nationals employed in US missions in Turkey. All have been accused of links to Fethullah Gulen, the alleged mastermind of the July 2016 coup against the Erdogan government.

home, he initiated a number of political reforms during 2013 and 2014, such as expanding Kurdish cultural rights and restricting the power of the military in political affairs; these measures were designed to advance Turkey's prospects toward EU membership and were initially welcomed in both Europe and the US. However, democratic reforms soon stalled. During succeeding years Erdogan pursued other ambitious goals, namely to 'Islamicize' Turkish society.

In doing so he has weakened the country's secular foundations. He also pursued an increasingly authoritarian path, suppressing dissent and undermining Turkey's fledgling democracy.

Erdogan adopted the same gradual approach to foreign policy as he did with his domestic agenda. Knowing that Western capitals would be anxious about how his party's Islamic roots might affect the direction of Turkey's international relations, he made several moves soon after assuming power to put these anxieties to rest. He has generally sought limit any fallout to bilateral relations with the US, and has taken several steps to win favour in Washington; these include allowing Allied warplanes to fly over Turkey en route to Iraq during the US invasion, joining NATO's International Security Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and allowing the US to host radar installations in south-eastern Turkey to monitor Iran's missile and potential nuclear activities.

Rising Tensions During the Bush and Obama Administrations

News and analysis of deteriorating Turkey-US relations often focus on the outsized personalities of those countries' heads of state: Erdogan and Trump. Although both leaders have stubborn personalities and are prone to undiplomatic outbursts that have complicated their countries' foreign policy, the issues that have burdened Turkey-US relations predate Trump by many years and can be traced back to the two preceding administrations. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a key turning point, with the George W. Bush administration complaining bitterly that Turkey, a fellow member of NATO, had rejected its request to use Turkish territory to help open a northern front in that war. For its part, Ankara worried that the ill-conceived invasion of its neighbor left it deeply vulnerable, and indeed these worries were validated: the invasion destroyed the Iraqi state, leaving Turkey with an autonomous Kurdish quasi-state on its border that has reinvigorated Kurdish secessionism and challenges to Turkey's territorial integrity. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an insurgent group that has fought a destructive secessionist war against the Turkish state for decades, took advantage of this safe haven to launch renewed attacks against Turkey.

In comparison, relations with Barack Obama's incoming administration were initially much more promising. To Ankara's delight, the US president chose to visit Turkey soon after assuming office in 2009, as part of his bid to improve US relations with the Muslim world. However, major disagreements soon emerged and proliferated. Soon after the start of a national uprising

in Syria in March, 2011 Erdogan threw Turkey's support behind the anti-Assad opposition groups. Seeking to avoid being drawn into yet another quagmire in the Middle East, the Obama administration initially avoided any direct support in Syria. As huge numbers of Syrian refugees streamed into Turkey to escape the civil war, Turkey repeatedly called for US support to create a no-fly zone in Syria. Obama declined again, wary of any military involvement in Syria that could risk a broader conflict. Worse still, Obama deepened Turkish anxieties by collaborating with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and providing direct support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (YPG), the Syrian branch of the PKK; the Kurdish rebel group has been designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US, NATO, and many European countries. Washington justified its support for the Kurdish group by arguing that it was the most effective fighting force against ISIS in Syria. But Ankara has seen this as a betrayal given the SDF's ambition to carve out an autonomous or independent existence on the Syria-Turkish border, and the prospect that it would join the PKK in fighting against Turkey in the future.

Further troubles strained Ankara's relations with Washington during the last year of the Obama administration. On July 15, 2016 a poorly hatched coup in Turkey almost toppled Erdogan and his government. The Turkish leader was troubled by what he considered to be Washington's lukewarm expression in his support and ultimately suspected collusion between the coup plotters and the US. Ankara accused Fethullah Gulen, a cleric formerly allied with Erdogan who has lived in exile in the US since 1999, of orchestrating the coup. Ankara has demanded Gulen's extradition to Turkey to face trial, but the US authorities have turned down these demands, citing insufficient evidence against Gulen. The list of Turkish grievances against the US grew further in 2017 with the arrest in the US of Mehmet Hakan Atilla, a senior executive of one of Turkey's largest banks; Atilla was subsequently convicted of violating US sanctions against Iran between 2012 and 2015 and is currently serving time in the US. The issue of his repatriation to Turkey to serve the rest of his jail sentence and the expected fine to be imposed by the US authorities against Halkbank have since been deliberated by high level officials and continue to this day.

In 2017 another critical issue emerged when the Turkish government announced that it would purchase the advanced Russian S-400 missile system instead of US-made Patriot missiles. The US has numerous concerns concerning this purchase and appealed to Turkey to cancel it, thus far to no avail. One serious complication arising from this planned transaction involves another impending purchase: Turkey has contracted to receive dozens of advanced F-35A stealth fighter jets from the US. The US fears that if Turkey has both US fighters and the S400 missiles it would confer an important security windfall to Russia: Moscow 'would be in a position to test just how useful the F-35's stealth is versus the formidable air defense

weapon. And if Turkey can acquire the data, then so could Russia.”³ Moreover, as the US and NATO reminded Ankara, the S-400s are incompatible with the alliance’s systems.

Tensions Reach a Boiling Point in the Trump Era

Trump has inherited these festering issues that have handicapped Turkey-US relations during his predecessors’ administrations. During the confrontation with Trump over the Brunson affair in August 2018, Erdogan called upon the US to “give up the misguided notion that our relationship can be asymmetrical and ... that Turkey has alternatives. Failure to reverse this trend of unilateralism and disrespect will require us to start looking for new friends and allies”.⁴

In fact, Turkey’s 2017 decision to purchase the S-400 missiles and new cooperative initiatives with Moscow in Syria has been seen by some observers as evidence that it has already pivoted toward Russia as well as Iran.⁵ Having reversed its policy of insisting that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad be removed from power, Turkey’s Syria policy interests currently align with those of Russia and Iran, namely preserving Syria’s territorial integrity and its survival as a unitary nation state.⁶ Russia is a major trading partner of Turkey and a key source of its natural gas imports. Millions of Russian tourists sustain Turkey’s tourism each year. Nonetheless, Moscow and Turkey compete for influence in the Balkans and the Caucasus, as well as the Middle East, and the recent Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria may not extend to other areas or endure in the long term. The same can be said of Turkish cooperation with Iran, which is a trading partner but also a longtime regional competitor of Turkey.

The most recent flare in Turkey-US relations has appeared in the context of those countries’ response to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the Washington-based dissident Saudi reporter, in Saudi Arabia’s consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018. Erdogan loudly and publicly rejected Saudi Arabia’s early official explanations and ultimately compelled Riyadh to acknowledge Saudi responsibility for the murder. He also successfully applied pressure on both Saudi Arabia and the US, thereby challenging the Trump administration’s firm support for the Saudis, hoping to drive a wedge between Washington and Riyadh. Many observers credited his diplomatic skills in managing the Khashoggi issue but also noted the irony of Erdogan’s clampdown on a free press in his country: Turkey is the leading jailer of journalists in the world with over 150 reporters languishing in prison since the failed coup attempt in 2016.

³ Sebastian Roblin, “America’s Big Fear: Turkey Mixing F-35s and Russia’s S-400 Air Defence System”, *New York Times*, July 7, 2018.

⁴ Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “How Turkey Sees the Crisis with the U.S.”, *New York Times* August 10, 2018.

⁵ Colin P. Clarke and Ariane M. Tabatabai, “Is Major Realignment Taking Place in the Middle East? Why Turkey Is Pivoting Toward Iran and Russia”, *Foreign Affairs*, October 31, 2018.

⁶ Clarke & Tabatabai

The Turkish president proudly embraces his country's Ottoman past and aspires to expand Turkey's relations and influence in the Balkans and the Middle East, and assume a leadership role. He has not hesitated to flex Ankara's muscle to gain an upper hand over its regional rivals. Erdogan's decision in 2017 to help Qatar overcome Saudi Arabia's blockade initiated on June 5, 2017, is a case in point. So are his diplomatic moves in the Khashoggi case. In both instances, his actions conflicted with Trump's. Erdogan believes that the West, and specifically the US, dictated to Turkey for too long and shown scant consideration for Turkish interests. He is right on a number of issues, especially concerning US sanctions against neighbouring Iran. Each time the US placed economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic, a major supplier of oil and gas and significant trading partner of Turkey, it obliged Ankara to bear a heavy cost. Thus, the adoption of US-led multilateral sanctions in 2012 resulted in Turkish-Iranian trade to drop precipitously from \$22 billion to \$14 billion by 2014, handicapping Turkish plans to increase trade with its neighbor.⁷

In the aftermath of Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal in May 2018, Ankara has protested the round of secondary sanctions that have gone into effect in November 2018. A temporary exemption to Turkey and seven other countries on oil imports from Iran will only provide short-term relief. Turkey relies heavily on imports of oil and natural gas to satisfy its energy needs "and neighbouring Iran has been one of its main sources of oil because of its proximity, the quality of its crude and favourable price differentials".⁸ If the new US sanctions on Iran result in an increase in oil prices that could worsen Turkey's inflation and further depreciate the battered Turkish lira.⁹ Although Ankara has declared that it would challenge the US restrictions on trade with Tehran, it is already reducing imports of Iranian oil in order to avoid the costs of US retaliation that would worsen its fragile, debt-ridden economy.

Following the release of pastor Brunson in October 2018, Turkey and the US have taken a number of initiatives that are aimed at mending their relations. These include the start of joint patrols in Manbij, in northern Syria, and Washington's renewed investigations of Fethullah Gulen.⁸ At the same time, policy makers in Washington or Ankara have no illusions about the challenges they face in view of the critical problems that require resolution: at the top of these is the Turkish bid to purchase Russian missiles that are scheduled for delivery in 2019, and the on-going quarrel over the US's backing of Syrian Kurds. Other issues over which Washington and Ankara differ have the potential to cause significant damage to their relationship. Among these are their opposing alliances. The Trump administration is a strong backer of Israel and supports its hardline policies against

⁷ "Turkey Looks for Ways Around U.S. Sanctions on Iran", *Stratfor*, August 29, 2018.

"Turkey Has U.S. Waiver on Iran Sanctions: Minister", *Reuters*, November 2, 2018.

"Turkey Looks for Ways Around the U.S. Sanctions on Iran", *Stratfor*, August 29, 2018.

⁸ Carlotta Gall, "Erdogan Didn't Get All He Hoped in Khashoggi Case, but His Stature Rises", *New York Times*, November 21, 2018.

Palestinians. It has cultivated an Israeli-Saudi axis to counter Iran's influence in the region. By contrast, Turkey believes that the US's policy toward Iran is misguided and worries about the instability that could emerge on its border if the US-Iran hostility deteriorates. Erdogan is an ardent supporter of the Palestinians and has close relations with Hamas. He also backs the Muslim Brotherhood, which pits Ankara against Egypt and virtually all other neighbouring Arab states that are aligned with the US. Among lesser irritants between Washington and Ankara is the gas exploration issue off the coast of Cyprus. The US supports the claim of the Republic of Cyprus to conduct such explorations in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) whereas Turkey opposes them on the grounds that it violates Turkish Cypriots claims. The recent hydrocarbon exploration activities of Exxon-Mobil off the waters of Cyprus, backed by Washington, may test US-Turkey relations if Ankara blocks such activities, as it did in the case of the Italian oil company ENI in February 2018.

On the S-400 missile issue the ball is in Turkey's court: they can either cancel the deal or to find an alternative resolution that would be acceptable to Washington. The Trump administration's stance has been bolstered by US Congressional proposals to make the delivery of the F35 jets to Turkey conditional on resolving the Russian missile issue. Turkey is keen to receive the F35 jets and to continue having access to purchasing advanced US armaments. It thus has a powerful incentive to remove a major irritant in its relations with the US. The punitive tariffs that Trump imposed against Turkey (and the implied threat of further penalties) to help release pastor Brunson was a reminder to Turkey's of its vulnerabilities, especially at a time when the Turkish economy is experiencing serious problems.

The deterioration of Turkey-US relations that has persisted across three successive American administrations may ultimately come to a head in the short term, with some reports going to far as to say that the Turkey-US "strategic relationship is a relic of the past".⁹ However, what will take its place remains unclear. Having alienated many EU countries in recent years, the Turkish government appears ready to mend ties with Europe¹⁰ and, for all his rhetorical bluster at Washington, Erdogan seems to recognize the importance of ties with the US and the limits of confronting it. Similarly, given Turkey's considerable geopolitical assets in a region where the US has vital interests but few stable friends, Washington will strive to find common ground with Ankara. Thus, despite the considerable erosion of trust between the two countries in recent years, they may nonetheless find reasons to build stronger relations over the long-term.

⁹ Steven Cook, "A Troubled Partnership", *Council for Foreign Relations Report*, November 2018.

¹⁰ Marc Pierini, President Erdogan Goes to Berlin', *Carnegie Europe*, September 11, 2018.