

American-Turkish Relations in the AKP Era

Alexandra Trangka

While Moscow and Washington antagonized over the imposition of UN sanctions on Syria,¹ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan revealed Ankara's plans² for the Turkish Army's slow advance in Syrian territory. During an interview with the Al-Arabiya television network, Erdogan announced that, after the completion of the long al-Bab operation,³ the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) would continue its advance towards the Kurdish-held northern Syrian city of Manbij.⁴ Its objective will be to dislodge the forces of the Syrian Kurdish socialist Democratic Union Party PYD – which is accused by Ankara for being directly linked with the “terrorist” Kurdistan Worker's Party PKK in Turkey – from the region west of Euphrates river. Importantly, these forces of the Kurdish People's Protection Units YPG, the armed wing of the PYD, form the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a vital armed alliance between Kurds, Arabs and Assyrians that is sponsored by the US-led international coalition against the Islamic State (IS).

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, US-Turkish relations⁵ showed severe signs of crumbling. Exploiting the geopolitical vacuum left by Washington in the Middle East, Ankara gradually began de-aligning itself from the West, in pursuit of its own strategic interests in the volatile Islamic Middle East. The roots of this strategic divergence can be identified in the distant 2003, when Recep Tayyip Erdogan was appointed as the 57th Prime Minister of the Turkish Republic.

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¹ Somini Sengupta, “A clash at the UN stands in contrast to White House admiration for Russia,” *New York Times*, 1 March 2017, 8.

² Ece Toksabay and Tuvan Gumrukcu, “Manbij is Turkey's next step in Syria operation, Erdogan says,” Reuters, 27 February 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN1670YC?il=0>.

³ On 29 March 2017 the Turkish National Security Council announced officially the termination of OP *EUPHRATES SHIELD* in Syria, without an offensive against Manbij; “Turkey can start new operation if necessary as Euphrates Shield ends: PM,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-can-start-new-operation-if-necessary-as-euphrates-shield-ends-pm-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=111401&NewsCatID=352>.

⁴ “Syria: US-Russia UN conflict while Turkish army is moving north,” CNN Greece, 28 February 2017, <http://www.cnn.gr/news/kosmos/story/69598/syria-antiparathesi-hpa-rosias-ston-ohe-pros-ta-voreia-kineitai-o-toyrkikos-stratos>.

⁵ Jim Zannoti and Thomas Clayton, “Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, Report R41368, 26 August 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R41368.pdf>.

American-Turkish relations between 2003 and the first Obama administration

The rise of the Justice and Development Party AKP into power, in 2002, turned into a landmark of Islamic “resistance” over the perceived American hegemony of Turkish affairs. Utilizing the theory of Ahmet Davutoglu’s *Strategic Depth*, the AKP sought to liberate Ankara from Western and American strategies and to become an alternative regional, if not global, center of power, founded on the ideology of political Islam.⁶ This ambitious strategy firstly appeared in the form of Turkish de-satellization when, in early March 2003, a parliamentary decision forbade the opening of a northern front during the US-led invasion against Iraq.⁷ The establishment of a semi-autonomous Kurdish state in Iraq has always been an extremely sensitive issue for Ankara and a potential threat for Turkish security and sovereignty; it was considered that any American backing of the Iraqi Kurds would be equivalent to an indirect effort of weakening Turkey.

Meanwhile, Ankara’s efforts to improve relations with Iran and Syria – Washington’s so-called “axis of Evil,” burdened further by the deterioration and eventual collapse of Israeli-Turkish relations after the *Mavi Marmara* incident, had a negative influence on American-Turkish relations.⁸ Regarding Israel, we should never underestimate its importance for Washington’s Middle-Eastern strategic calculations. Agreeing with the Mearsheimer-Walt perspective about the powerful “Israeli Lobby,”⁹ Brezinski, acknowledged the influence of Israel and the Israeli lobbies in the formation of the United States’ foreign policy. On the other side, Ankara regarded Israel as an obstacle to its own maximization of power and influence in the region and considered that Israel’s territorial confinement to its natural limits, those of former Palestine, would perfectly serve the revived Turkish ambitions of a Pax Ottomanica.¹⁰

The rupture of the multi-level Turkish-Israeli relation was a blow to US regional policy which, for decades, was founded on the axes of its Moslem NATO ally and its Jewish strategic partner; a strategic relationship between Ankara and Tel Aviv that enabled Washington to promote its post-Cold War strategy in the Middle East.¹¹

American-Turkish relations were further undermined, when presidents Gul and Medvedev, signed on 13 February 2009 a joint declaration on strengthening Turkish-Russian relations. The alignment of Ankara with the eternal enemy of Washington, for the containment of American influence in the energy-pivotal Caucasus, increased the pressure of the Republican US Congress for the adoption of the Armenian Genocide resolution, filed in March 2009 and passed by the Foreign Affairs Committee on 4 March 2010.¹²

The prospect of change appeared with the rise of the Democrats in Washington, in January 2009, when President Barack Obama’s first visit abroad to Turkey, inspired a “model partnership”

⁶ Nikos Moudouros and Michalis N. Michael, *The New Turkish Hegemony: Dimensions of the Political Islam* [in Greek], (Athens: Papazisis, 2014), 272.

⁷ Dexter Filkins, “Threats and responses: Ankara, Turkish deputies refuse to accept American troops,” *New York Times*, 2 March 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/02/world/threats-and-responses-ankara-turkish-deputies-refuse-to-accept-american-troops.html>.

⁸ Moudouros and Michael, *The New Turkish Hegemony*, 307-308.

⁹ Vasilis Fouskas, *Empire and War: The Crisis of the American High Strategy and the Emergence of Multipolarity* [in Greek], (Athens: Poiotita, 2009), 229; as for the Mearsheimer-Walt perspective about the Israeli lobby, see <https://piotita.gr/2014/02/06/the-israel-lobby/>.

¹⁰ Frangos Frangoulis, *What Turkey? About Turks?* [in Greek], (Athens: Livanis, 2012), 509.

¹¹ Moudouros and Michael, *The New Turkish Hegemony*, 312-313.

¹² Dimitris Triantafyllou and Eleni Fotiou, *Turkish Foreign Policy in the AKP Era: Towards a Pax Ottomana?* [in Greek], (Athens: Papazisis, 2010), 187-188, 199, 203.

that encouraged cooperation, beyond military and strategic matters. Failing to fill the big bubble of model partnership, with concrete targets and the support of institutional structures, the two sides eventually fell short of realizing a “special relationship.” This has paved the way for divergencies, even on basic security and strategic issues, particularly in the Middle East. Among other questions, the disagreement on how to deal with Iran, and specifically Turkey’s rejection of the US-initiated UN Security Council resolution on new sanctions, caused a major rift.¹³

When the Arab revolts erupted, despite the gradual deterioration of relations between the two countries, Washington appeared to favor the promotion of political institutions similar to those in Ankara. But soon, the Turkish model was questioned after AKP government’s violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations at Gezi Park in the summer of 2013, the severe democratization problems, and Ankara’s controversial regional policies, which encouraged destabilization and religious/ethnic sectarianism.¹⁴ Also NATO’s operation in Libya was initially opposed by Ankara; its reaction to foreign intervention was associated with the numerous Turkish investments in the country and the opposition to any kind of Western involvement in the Islamic world of the Middle East.¹⁵ The final blow to US-Turkish relations was given in 2012, when the Muslim Brotherhood won the presidential elections in Egypt, before being overthrown by a military coup in 2013. Mohamed Morsi’s overturn terrified the Turkish President, who feared his own overthrow by a military coup.¹⁶ When Ankara blamed Washington for Abdul Fattah al-Sisi’s takeover, the Obama-Erdogan connection broke.¹⁷

The influence of the Syrian crisis on US-Turkish relations

A brief examination of the Syrian-Turkish relations indicates a significant improvement after the diplomatic and economic opening of the Assad regime towards the Islamic government of AKP in 2004. Shortly before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the two countries cooperated in the context of the Turkish-Syrian Higher Cooperation Council, while conducting joint military exercises, signing public infrastructure agreements, and planning their economic and commercial transactions. The AKP government changed its attitude towards Damascus when the revolt became rampant:¹⁸ Ankara grew into the most formidable criticizer of the Syrian regime, not only by threatening a military intervention in northern Syria but also by playing a central role in international negotiations for the management of the Syrian crisis.¹⁹ The AKP government’s objective was to secure American sympathy – over a potential Turkish military intervention in Syria to safeguard Turkish interests – as well as the dissidents’ support if Assad lost power.²⁰

¹³ Mehmet Yegin and Hasan Selim Ozertem, “Turkey-US Relations: How to Proceed after Obama?” The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 10 November 2016, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/turkey%E2%80%93us-relations-how-proceed-after-obama>.

¹⁴ Zenonas Tziarras and Nikos Moudouros, *Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean: Ideological Aspects of Foreign Policy* [in Greek], (Athens: Tourikis, 2016), 109, 113.

¹⁵ Moudouros and Michael, *New Turkish Hegemony*, 329.

¹⁶ Nikolas Zerganos, “Turkey: An Uncertain Ally,” *Efimerida ton Syndakton*, 24 October 2016, <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/toyrkia-enas-avevaios-symmahos>.

¹⁷ Soner Cagaptay, “Is the US-Turkey Relationship Crumbling?” The Washington Institute, 5 February 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-the-u.s.-turkey-relationship-crumbling>.

¹⁸ Elias Kouskouvelis et al. (eds), *The Arab Spring: Studies of International Relations* [in Greek], (Salonika: University of Macedonia, 2012), 84-85.

¹⁹ Moudouros and Michael, *The New Turkish Hegemony*, 329.

²⁰ Kouskouvelis, *The Arab Spring*, 85-86.

The turning point in the Syrian war's evolution was the proclamation of an Islamic "caliphate," by the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS), on 29 June 2014,²¹ that sparked a Washington-led anti-ISIS coalition air campaign and close combat support of the Kurdish forces fighting the jihadists on the ground.²² The US-PYD alignment, a continuation of a policy that emerged after the Ankara-Washington crisis of 2003, was founded on the American preference of the Syrian Kurdish troops that, after their training by US special forces, were considered as the most effective fighters and reliable allies in the battle against the Islamic jihadists.²³ The close American support of the Syrian Kurds and Washington's refusal to establish a no-fly zone²⁴ in northern Syria, angered Ankara, since the potential evolution of Kurdistan is considered Turkey's biggest security threat.²⁵ By the summer of 2016, the possible merge of the Syrian Kurdish north cantons was considered by Erdogan as an existential threat, due to the firm Turkish perceptions about Kurdistan and the ideological monopolization of the Syrian Kurds by the Turkish Kurd PKK.²⁶

The American-Turkish relations were already over-stretched. On 7 January 2015, Ankara expressed its disappointment of Washington's limited air strikes against ISIS,²⁷ while the American alignment with the PYD, led Ankara to threaten closing the Incirlik air base, that was used by the air assets of the US-led coalition;²⁸ a month later, the Obama administration was obliged to remove the families of US personnel from Turkey.²⁹

American concerns intensified after the spectacular rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow, where the Turkish President found a convenient temporary ally to contain the northern Syrian Kurdish threat. The rupture of American-Turkish relations turned dramatic after the failed military coup of 15 July 2016. Erdogan accused the Pennsylvania-based cleric Fethullah Gulen – considered Erdogan's archenemy – for the attempted coup and demanded from Washington his immediate extradition to Turkey; the cautious position of the Obama administration about the need of clear evidence of his involvement,³⁰ made Erdogan furious. Similarly, the arrest of the Turkish commander of the Incirlik air base, for his alleged involvement in the coup, and the temporary

²¹ "BBC: Why the ISIS 'caliphate' is dangerous?" [in Greek], *To Vima*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.tovima.gr/world/article/?aid=611330>.

²² Ben Hubbard and David E. Sanger, "Russia, Iran and Turkey meet for Syria talks, excluding US," *The New York Times*, 20 December 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/20/world/middleeast/russia-iran-and-turkey-meet-for-syria-talks-excluding-us.html?_r=0.

²³ Barry Strauss, "Uneasy Allies: America, Turkey and the Kurds," Hoover Institution, 22 April 2016, <http://www.hoover.org/research/uneasy-allies-america-turkey-and-kurds>.

²⁴ Both the White House and the Pentagon denied the establishment of a buffer zone and a no-fly zone, claiming them as costly and difficult in implementation; see Tania Bozaninou, "The 'new Kurdish Question' becomes Turkish President Erdogan's nightmare" [in Greek], *To Vima*, 12 October 2014, <http://www.tovima.gr/world/article/?aid=640234>.

²⁵ Moudouros and Michael, *The New Turkish Hegemony*, 335.

²⁶ Tziarras and Moudouros, *Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean*, 203.

²⁷ Cagaptay, "US-Turkey Relationship."

²⁸ "Turkey considers closing Incirlik airbase," *YeniSafak*, 20 February 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/turkey-considers-closing-incirlik-airbase-2419379>.

²⁹ "US orders families of government personnel to leave southern Turkey," *The Huffington Post*, 30 March 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/us-government-families-ordered-to-leave-turkey_us_56fbcfc9e4b0daf53aee0bcb.

³⁰ "Erdogan: I asked personally from Barack Obama Gulen's extradition" [in Greek], *Naftemporiki*, 18 August 2016, <http://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1138619/erntogan-zitisa-prosopika-apo-ton-ompama-tin-ekdosi-gkioulen>.

closure of the Turkish airspace for American air forces,³¹ increased Washington's uneasiness that considered transferring abroad the US nuclear weapons stored on Turkish soil.³²

In his effort to restore the cold relations between the two NATO allies, Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Ankara, uncoincidentally, signalled the beginning of Turkish Operation *EUPHRATES SHIELD* in northern Syria as well as US Air Force support for the Turkish Army-FSA incursion against ISIS. The American-Turkish rapprochement encountered more troubles when, in November 2016, Washington announced that it would interrupt the air support of the Turkish operation against al-Bab, due to the Turkish bombardment of YPG's positions in the region³³ and the dismissal of hundreds of Turkish military officers, serving NATO in Europe and the US, in the context of the "refinement" of the Turkish Armed Forces after the failed coup attempt.³⁴

The final act of the American-Turkish drama was played in Astana of Kazakhstan, where Russia, Iran and Turkey aligned their efforts to achieve a political agreement on ending the six-year civil war in Syria, leaving the United States on the sidelines.³⁵ Since then, Erdogan accused Washington of murdering the Russian Ambassador Andrey Karlov³⁶ and of "supporting the Islamic State and the armed wing of PYD,"³⁷ to receive counter-accusations from American officials that behind the July coup was the Turkish President himself.³⁸

Future perspectives

As already noted, American-Turkish relations plunged to an unprecedentedly low level during the Obama administration. The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy, the corruption of Turkish-Israeli relations, the Syrian crisis, the Kurdish question, the rapprochement of Ankara with Moscow and the 15 July coup attempt, caused American concerns over Turkish allied loyalty.³⁹

In all likelihood, the state of American-Turkish relations under Donald Trump will probably follow an identical path trodden by Obama. Initial optimism, for convergence of interests and re-establishment of a trading relationship, very soon gave way to acrimony and strained cooperation. Trump's raw statements about Islamic terrorism and Muslims, especially his promise to ban their entry to the United States, caused anger to Erdogan, who reacted vehemently via the Deputy Prime Minister. "Refugees are welcome," said Mehmet Simsek on Twitter; "We'd happily welcome global

³¹ Zannoti and Clayton, *Turkey*, 21.

³² Dan Lamothe, "The US stores nuclear weapons in Turkey: Is that such a good idea?" *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/07/19/an-old-nuclear-weapons-deal-raises-new-questions-about-u-s-bombs-in-turkey/?utm_term=.6b80889f95c8.

³³ "Is Erdogan trying to wreck US-Turkey relations?" *Al Monitor*, 31 December 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/erdogan-wreck-us-turkey-relations-rouhani-aleppo.html#>.

³⁴ Robin Emmott, "Exclusive: Turkey purges NATO military envoys after failed coup," *Reuters*, 12 October 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-nato-exclusive-idUSKCN12C16Q>.

³⁵ Hubbard and Sanger, "Russia, Iran and Turkey."

³⁶ "American-Turkish relations go red" [in Greek], *Kathimerini*, 22 December 2016, <http://www.kathimerini.gr/888954/article/epikairothta/kosmos/sto-kokkino-oi-sxeseis-toyrkias---hpa>.

³⁷ "Is Erdogan trying to wreck US-Turkey relations?"

³⁸ "NATO officials argue that Erdogan was behind the coup" [in Greek], *ANT1*, 26 January 2017, <http://www.ant1iwo.com/news/kosmos/article/260967/axiomatouhoi-tou-nato-ishurizodai-pos-ertogan-itan-piso-apo-to-praxikopima-/>.

³⁹ The concerns intensified due to the Russian-Turkish talks to purchase advanced S-400 long-range air defense missile systems; see "Erdogan and Putin will discuss S-400 purchase from Turkey" [in Greek], *Macedonia*, 28 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/VU4eN4>.

talent not allowed back into USA,” he wrote.⁴⁰ A blow to Ankara’s policy was also the resignation of Trump’s National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn, who had expressed willingness to extradite Fetullah Gulen;⁴¹ in any case, Washington will avoid “burning” its strong bargaining chip to Ankara and Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Furthermore, Trump’s will to restore relations with Jerusalem⁴² could fuel further tensions in the Middle East. If the US Embassy is indeed moved to Jerusalem, the Palestinian question could turn into a storm. Expectedly, the Israelis will label the Palestinians as “radical Islamists” and reduce their resistance to Hamas terrorism. If and when Turkey sides with the Palestinians, Washington will presumably argue that Ankara backs “radical Islamic terrorism.”⁴³

The Syrian as well as the Kurdish questions will probably continue to be thorny issues in US-Turkish relations. Despite the repeated visits of Trump’s administration officials – the CIA Director Mike Pompeo, Senator John McCain and Foreign Secretary Rex Tillerson – and the two leaders’ phone call, the United States has not taken any tangible commitment to withdraw their support of the YPG. The US-backed coalition against ISIS has boosted its support of its Syrian allies, supplying armored vehicles, for the first time, as they prepare for a new phase in their campaign to recapture Raqqa.⁴⁴ Also came to light the SDF representative’s statements, according to which, American General Joseph L. Votel, Commanding Officer of the Joint Special Operations Command, not only paid a secret visit to Kobani and Raqqa, but also pledged to supply heavy weaponry and armored vehicles to the YPG-dominated group in northern Syria within the next few days.⁴⁵ If, eventually, Turkey decides to extend OP *EUPHRATES SHIELD*, under another name, against the Kurdish-held town of Manbij or IS-held Raqqa, then, it will probably find itself face to face with Russian and American forces.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Azadeh Ansari, Nic Robertson and Angela Dewan, “World leaders react to Trump’s travel ban,” CNN, 31 January 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/30/politics/trump-travel-ban-world-reaction/>.

⁴¹ Fadi Hakura, “What next for US-Turkey relations under a Trump presidency?” *Newsweek*, 12 November 2016, <http://europe.newsweek.com/what-next-us-turkey-relations-under-trump-presidency-520275?rm=eu>.

⁴² “We have always stood by Israel’s side and will continue to stand, as it is the only stable and democratic state in the region,” see Donald Trump, *America Great Again: How to Fix our Crippled America* [in Greek], (Athens: Minoas, 2017), 63.

⁴³ Duran Burhanettin, “Resetting Turkey-US relations in the Trump era,” *Daily Sabah*, 27 January 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2017/01/27/resetting-turkey-us-relations-in-the-trump-era>.

⁴⁴ Tom Perry, “Syrian militias get more US support for IS fight, plan new phase,” Reuters, 31 January 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-arms-idUSKBN15F15S>.

⁴⁵ “US to supply heavy weaponry, armored vehicles to YPG-dominated group in northern Syria,” *Daily Sabah*, 25 February 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2017/02/25/us-to-supply-heavy-weaponry-armored-vehicles-to-ypg-dominated-group-in-northern-syria>.

⁴⁶ “US, Russia Forces in Eye Contact in Syria’s Manbij,” 15 March 2013, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201703151051613387-russia-us-manbij-contact/>; Andrew deGrandpre, “US and Russian troops are now in the same Syrian city,” 13 March 2017, <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/manbij-syria-us-troops-army-rangers-russia-turkey>; Barbara Starr, “US Marines join local forces fighting in Raqqa,” 9 March 2017, CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/08/politics/marines-raqqa-assault-syria/>.



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