



Beyond the Myth of Partnership: Rethinking U.S. Policy Toward Turkey

December 2016



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

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Executive Summary



Amid continued threats to U.S. national security and interests emanating from the Middle East, the promise of partnership and cooperation with Turkey will remain—as it has for the past two administrations—an alluring option for American policymakers. It is incredibly unlikely, however, that the U.S.-Turkish relationship can yield any strategic benefit at this point. The incoming administration, rather than remain bound by an increasingly infeasible commitment to a U.S.-Turkish partnership, should recognize the reality and profundity of the challenges confronting Turkey, recalibrate relations to increase U.S. leverage, and focus its energy on the ongoing erosion of Turkish democracy.

Today, Ankara and Washington visibly and vocally disagree about pressing regional strategic issues. In particular, the two nations have clashed over U.S. attempts to defeat the Islamic State (ISIS) by

cooperating with the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), as well as both countries' broader approaches to the Syrian civil war. However, these divergences in foreign policy are driven by domestic dynamics in Turkey that are unlikely to change any time soon.

For Turkey, foreign policy is now largely about securing the government's power at home, which relies on expanding an authoritarian state and destroying any viable political opposition. Turkey's war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), its extension of this war into Syria, and its campaign against Islamic cleric Fetullah Gülen are all part of this agenda.

Undergirding Turkey's domestic agenda is an increasingly unavoidable shift in values. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in addition to pursuing power for its own sake, is seeking

to transform Turkey's state, society, and position in the world. Erdoğan's efforts to create a "new Turkey"—as much as insufficient U.S. attention to Turkish demands or inadequate use of available leverage—continue to create conflict between Ankara and Washington.

These sources of strain are likely to persist. Erdoğan's need to consolidate power, his perceptions of lurking political enemies, and his persistent anti-Americanism mean that U.S. attempts to mollify his concerns will not create a foundation for a workable relationship. Beneath the battle over the extradition of Gülen, for example, lies the more deeply problematic fact that many within the Turkish government, perhaps including Erdoğan himself, sincerely believe that Washington was behind July 15 coup attempt in Turkey.¹

Even if Washington were to fulfill Erdoğan's immediate demands, such as extraditing Gülen and ceasing cooperation with the YPG, rather than embrace the United States, Erdoğan would only be emboldened to demand even more in future confrontations. If the United States were to return Gülen to Turkey, Erdoğan would in time most likely find new public enemies. If the United States were to cut off aid to Syrian Kurdish groups, Ankara would only be more aggressive in its attempts to confront them. In short, it is crucial to recognize that Gülen and the YPG are as much the symptoms as the causes of the current breakdown in bilateral relations.

Worse still, the deteriorating U.S.-Turkish relationship is not the only casualty of Erdoğan's attempt to transform Turkey. There is also a risk that rather than creating a stable authoritarian state, Erdoğan's policies will dangerously undermine Turkey's stability instead, thereby aggravating an already inflamed region. By exacerbating social divisions with his aggressive rhetoric, turning a blind eye to ISIS, fomenting anti-Western hostility, and undermining the foundations of the Turkish economy through corruption, Erdoğan has helped sow the seeds of domestic conflict. Preserving space for democracy's eventual return to Turkey—and, by

extension, the rekindling of a much-needed constructive and cooperative U.S.-Turkish partnership—requires a total reframing of U.S. policy toward Turkey.

Such a reframing is only possible with a clear understanding of the new realities on the ground, such as the unlikelihood of any partnership with Turkey that would further U.S. interests right now, the very real threats that Turkey currently faces, and the Turkish government's responsibility for both. If American policymakers refuse to reckon with the actual nature of the challenge confronting U.S.-Turkish relations—a challenge that is consistently obscured by myths about Turkey, its government, and the efficacy of the tools at the U.S. government's disposal—they will be condemned to a perpetual cycle of crisis management from which both Washington and Ankara will ultimately emerge worse off.

Squandering the leverage the United States has over Turkey in an attempt to cajole cooperation on ISIS, for example, risks making the fundamental problem of Erdoğan's authoritarianism worse, which would then force the United States to commit even more of its dwindling influence toward managing the fallout. Rather than appeasing and enabling Erdoğan's behavior, Washington must instead tackle the structural and domestic factors that drive it.

The first step, therefore, is to challenge some of the myths that still surround the U.S.-Turkish relationship. For years and across administrations from both parties, Washington has been operating with an exaggerated belief in the amount of assistance Ankara can or will provide in facing crucial geopolitical challenges. This has often led American policymakers to exhaust their diplomatic capital in futile efforts to gain Turkish cooperation when instead they could have deployed their influence more effectively elsewhere. It is time to acknowledge that Washington and Ankara no longer share the same values or strategic priorities, and, therefore, there is little that the United States can offer Erdoğan that would make him a more reasonable or cooperative partner. Further, American policymakers must relinquish the self-fulfilling belief that

Washington has greater need of Ankara than Ankara does of Washington. Finally, when it comes to applying leverage, it is important not to confuse Erdoğan's strength for Turkish stability.

For too long Washington has sought to avoid recognizing the challenges it faces in Turkey, and as a result, U.S. policy has alternated between antagonizing Ankara and then eagerly trying to appease it. The next administration should confront these challenges by moving beyond the myth that Turkey, under Erdoğan, can be a model for, a solution to, or a partner on Middle Eastern challenges. Although Turkey will continue to play a central role in some of the key challenges facing U.S. foreign policy, it is no longer possible for Washington to call on Turkey's support in these challenges as an ally. That's why a new policy framework is needed for Turkey, one that ensures that Turkey does not work at cross-purposes with U.S. interests and one that prevents Turkey from falling victim to the self-inflicted instability that has consumed so many of its neighbors and become, in and of itself, an additional driver of regional chaos.

Background



Since the fall of the Soviet Union, some observers have speculated that, with the disappearance of the main strategic threat uniting the two countries, U.S.-Turkish ties would naturally begin to weaken. Throughout the 1990s, however, U.S.-Turkish cooperation continued, pivoting in focus from Eurasia to primarily, but not exclusively, the Middle East, often driven by a joint commitment to preserving or building a stable regional order.² Turkey provided basing rights that were crucial for Operation Desert Storm, and it enforced the subsequent no-fly zone against Saddam Hussein.³ It also supplied troops to support United Nations operations in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia. As Turkey struggled to improve its economy and democracy amid an ongoing war with Kurdish separatists, the United States lent its support—by helping to capture PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and by securing an International Monetary Fund stabilization package following Turkey’s 2001 economic crisis.

With the election of the AKP in 2002, many in Washington hoped that by fostering prosperity and greater democracy, the party could advance longstanding U.S. interests by bringing Turkey into the European Union and spreading liberal values throughout the Middle East.⁴ The party’s first decade in power offered grounds for both optimism and concern. Turkey’s domestic politics continued to democratize through 2007 and 2008, though evidence of Erdoğan’s authoritarian and anti-Western instincts were also visible. Similarly, in foreign policy, Ankara’s willingness to reconcile with onetime rivals like Syria and Russia was open to different interpretations: Was it a pragmatic drive for stability and new economic opportunities or an ideologically driven departure from Turkey’s pro-Western orientation?

Against this backdrop, both the Bush and Obama administrations initially erred on the side of optimism, hoping to work with Turkey and the AKP to advance a shared agenda. By 2013, however, rising authoritarianism symbolized by the government's response to the Gezi Park protests, combined with irreconcilable foreign policy priorities, most notably by Ankara's support for extremist groups in Syria led to a shift in thinking, and frustration with Ankara became the norm.⁵ Subsequently, Turkey's July 15 coup attempt pushed Erdoğan's authoritarianism into overdrive, resulting in a wave of crackdowns against not only the Turkish military but also against Erdoğan's opponents in the judiciary, the parliament, the university system, and the press. More than 100,000 civil servants have been suspended, while over a dozen members of parliament from the country's pro-Kurdish political party have been arrested.⁶

Despite this, however, Washington seems to still believe that so long as Turkey remains central to achieving crucial U.S. interests in the Middle East, most notably winning the war against ISIS, it should maintain a functional—if frustrating—modus vivendi with Ankara. In the face of Turkish anger over U.S. support for Kurdish fighters in Syria, for example, Washington has variously tried to cajole, ignore, and appease Ankara. At best, this strategy has succeeded so far in averting a major conflict between Washington's Turkish and Kurdish allies. In doing so, however, the United States has largely papered over the differences between the two groups and has helped each fuel a seemingly unsustainable level of mutual resentment against the other. Meanwhile, Washington has no fallback plan for the moment these resentments prove to be unmanageable.

As a result, the stakes for getting America's Turkey policy right are now higher than ever. For better or worse, Turkey will continue to play a central role in some of the key challenges facing U.S. foreign policy, from resolving the Syrian civil war to defeating ISIS and containing Iran and Russia. If it is no longer possible for Washington to call on Turkey's support in these challenges as an ally,

policymakers will have to be increasingly clear-eyed in securing Turkish cooperation where possible and in ensuring that Turkey does not work at cross-purposes to U.S. interests. As importantly, American policymakers will simultaneously have to make sure that Turkey does not fall victim to the self-inflicted instability that has consumed so many of its neighbors and that has become, in and of itself, a further driver of regional chaos.

Dispelling Myths



Rethinking U.S. policy toward Turkey cannot happen so long as it remains guided by the persistent and bipartisan myths that have endured across the last two administrations. The new administration would do well to dispel these illusions before they cause lasting harm to the U.S.-Turkish alliance, U.S. interests in the Middle East, and Turkey itself.

Myth: Turkey shares U.S. interests and values.

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the U.S.-Turkish alliance was widely understood in both Washington and Ankara as the product of shared interests and shared values. A joint hostility toward the Soviet Union, coupled with Turkey's often imperfect but enduring

commitment to democracy served as the two key reference points for the alliance. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Turkey's democratization, commitment to global and regional stability, and integration into the European Union served as new shared goals that ensured the alliance's continuation.

Now, however, U.S. and Turkish interests have increasingly parted ways. The AKP leadership, even in its more pragmatic moments, has displayed a distinct sympathy for Islamist groups that are often at odds with the West. Under Erdoğan, Ankara has hosted Hamas leaders and famously sought to act as the group's patron in Gaza. Following the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Turkey embraced the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and seemed eager for a political realignment that would bring the movement's affiliates to power around the region. More troublingly, in the past several years, Turkey

actively supported extremist al-Qaeda-affiliated forces in Syria, such as the former al-Nusra Front. It also turned a blind eye toward ISIS in the hope that the group could play a valuable role in bolstering Turkey's position against PKK-aligned forces in Syria.⁷ Most recently, in an about-face aimed at rekindling relations with Russia, Erdoğan has floated the idea of purchasing Russian weapons and allowing Russian planes on the Incirlik airbase. More broadly, where a shared commitment to regional prosperity, integration, and stability once united Turkish and U.S. interests, Turkey has, since the Arab Spring, been more erratic in responding to a shifting political environment, more willing to antagonize regional powers, and more likely to back non-state actors to advance its interests.

For Ankara, the driving interest, in both foreign and domestic policy, is regime consolidation. Thus, Turkey has shown a willingness to work with any partner that can help it advance its domestic aims. So long as Erdoğan's government remains focused on its domestic concerns, this behavior should be expected and will only be exacerbated as Turkish and U.S. values grow further apart. Most recently, Erdoğan declared that if foreigners called him a "dictator," it was of no concern to him and that he was not interested in the views of anyone other than God.⁸ To this end, he has blithely ignored Western criticism when arresting journalists and closing down dissident nongovernmental organizations or when establishing a "Turkish-style" executive presidency that would do away with a separation of powers entirely. More concretely, he has endorsed a plan to reinstate the death penalty, which would effectively bring Turkey's EU bid to an end.⁹

At a deeper level, the government's ongoing and sweeping purges—of the judiciary, education sector, and the military—have clearly shown a preference for regime entrenchment over the continued functioning of the state. Given the scale of the purges to the military, for example, it is no longer clear how effective a force the Turkish

army would be even if it were deployed directly against ISIS. Similarly, the government's overhaul of the police and intelligence, done with a preference for loyalty over competence, will make it harder for Turkey to operate effectively against ISIS cells that are already embedded within the country. Turkey's domestic agenda has made it an increasingly erratic, uncooperative, and incapable partner—trends that show no signs of abating.

In the future, then, the risk of Turkish and U.S. interests coming into conflict will only grow. A government that was willing to engage in de facto cooperation with ISIS will not be bound by the norms of the Western community or the interests of the NATO alliance. On Iran, for example, Ankara has a history of trying to have its cake and eat it, too, relying on NATO's nuclear umbrella as a defense against the risks posed by a nuclear Iran, while at the same time opposing and undermining Western sanctions designed to curb Iran's nuclear program.¹⁰ The ongoing trial of Turkish-Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab provides a telling example of how this happened. Zarrab bribed officials close to the AKP in order to facilitate a gold-smuggling scheme that helped the Iranian regime avoid international sanctions and currency restrictions. This operation served AKP interests not only through the payments party members received but also by maintaining commercial ties with Iran at a moment they otherwise would have been strained. When this bribery scheme was exposed by Turkish prosecutors (who were clearly linked to the Gülen movement), the AKP's response was purely focused on regime preservation, rather than the larger geopolitical consequences of the crime. Thus, the government has shut down any investigation into Zarrab's activities and has subsequently lobbied for the U.S. government to drop the case against Zarrab as well.¹¹ Throughout all of this, the importance of the sanctions regime itself, or the risks posed by Iran's nuclear program, never seem to have entered into the government's calculations.

Erdoğan has also taken traditional anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric to new heights since the coup attempt, amplifying a widespread conspiracy theory that the United States and Europe represent the principal geopolitical threats to Turkey. Any threats to Erdoğan's domestic position in the future will force him to double down on this rhetoric and will pressure him to give such rhetoric greater tangible expression in Turkish foreign policy. Turning a blind eye toward this dynamic will only allow it to fester, deepening the gulf in values and interests between Washington and Ankara. Hence, it is crucial to recognize that so long as this fracture of values remains unaddressed, it will persist.

Myth: Erdoğan is a strongman America can work with or appease.

Despite the evidence, it still might be tempting to conclude that Erdoğan could prove to be an authoritarian leader with whom Washington could have a mutually beneficial, transactional relationship—as it did with Egypt's General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, for example, or even with the Turkish generals who came to power after the country's 1980 coup. In this light, observers have been tempted to dismiss Erdoğan's most provocative positions, especially in foreign policy, as rhetoric designed for domestic consumption that does not necessarily reflect Ankara's actual interests. Yet this optimism misunderstands both the depth and sincerity of Erdoğan's anti-Western attitudes and the extent to which his populist rhetoric comes to shape policy. This assessment also ignores the extent to which Erdoğan's consolidation of power makes Turkish policy more erratic, more dependent on Erdoğan's shifting personal ambitions, and, in many cases, more divorced from reality.¹²

Erdoğan's apparently sincere belief that the United States orchestrated a coup attempt against him, for example, is perhaps the most telling example of how deep Erdoğan's anti-American thinking goes and how easily it can influence Turkish policy. Following the trauma that unfolded on the night of July 15, Turkish

government rhetoric—coming from the president, the prime minister, the AKP cabinet, and the pro-AKP media—has argued that the United States backed the effort with a degree of vehemence and consistency that suggests real conviction. Turkey's labor minister, Süleyman Soylu, was perhaps the most direct, declaring, “America is behind the coup.”¹³ Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım was only slightly subtler, saying Turkey would “consider itself at war with any country that supports Gülen.”¹⁴ Ibrahim Karagül—writing in a newspaper controlled by Erdoğan's in-laws—went further, arguing without evidence that the United States actually tried to kill the Turkish president. From Erdoğan to ordinary citizens, it seemed impossible that such an event could have unfolded without Washington's complicity, especially when the coup's supposed mastermind, Gülen, resides in the United States. In subsequent statements, Turkish officials argued that as long as Washington kept “sheltering” Gülen, it could never be considered a friend of Turkey's.

The result of this suspicion is that even if the administration tried to reassure Ankara by, say, handing over Gülen, the sense of abiding hostility would remain, creating a fundamental cleaving of interests. More importantly, Erdoğan long ago realized the value of anti-American posturing as a way of mobilizing his base and discrediting his opposition. With Erdoğan trying to consolidate his power as president and fend off the potential fallout from a likely economic crash, this anti-American approach will become even more important to his domestic position.

Yet even absent this unique anti-American dynamic, there is good reason to doubt that appeasement could ever be an effective strategy—especially when Turkish policy is driven by domestic concerns. The story of Turkey's failed refugee deal with Europe might be the best example of this. When European leaders worked out an arrangement with Ankara in which Turkey would receive financial and political benefits for preventing the flow of Syrian refugees into Europe, many observers denounced it as a cynical capitulation, particularly as European leaders went on to mute their criticism of Erdoğan in order to ensure the deal's survival.

The German government even allowed a lawsuit to proceed against a comedian who mocked Erdoğan on television.¹⁵ But if the deal was cynical, it was also short-lived and short-sighted.¹⁶ Turkey's eagerness to arrest Kurdish politicians and human rights advocates—who, in calling for peace, supposedly supported the PKK—made it impossible to amend Turkey's anti-terrorism laws to come into compliance with the legal requirements for EU visa-liberalization.¹⁷ With Turkey refusing to make this change, and, more broadly, persecuting critics and driving the country toward a destabilizing civil conflict, EU officials were confronted with the distinct possibility that allowing Turks to travel to Europe visa-free would result in a new wave of Turkish refugees and asylum seekers in place of the Syrians they were already trying to limit. As a result, the European Union was unable to move forward with the liberalization process, which had been one of the most popular concessions offered by Europe. Turkish politicians responded to this impasse by lashing out at the European Union, condemning Europe's hypocrisy and supposed support for terrorism.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, this reaction only deepened the backlash against the deal among European critics, making it more difficult for pro-inclusion European leaders to further fulfill their end of the agreement, and leaving the deal teetering on the edge of collapse.¹⁹ In short, even when European leaders were willing to look the other way on Erdoğan's political excesses and sins, it was his very authoritarianism that ended up undermining the security goals they were trying to cooperate with Turkey on.

Europe's experience, indeed, has been indicative of the results Washington has obtained in its periodic efforts to curtail criticism of Turkish authoritarianism in return for concessions on crucial foreign policy issues. While Washington has inspired considerable anger in Ankara by cooperating with Syrian Kurds in the war against ISIS, it has at the same time tried to assuage that anger by turning a blind eye to Ankara's blatant assaults on basic freedoms. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Turkey at the height of the government's post-coup purge stood out as a particularly striking example of this

approach, especially when he seemed to imply that there was no need for Washington to speak out as no one had actually been executed yet. While in the short run Biden's silence may have won limited cooperation from Ankara, it has not prevented tensions from escalating over plans for how to take Raqqa from ISIS or over threats to disrupt the operation by targeting Syrian Kurdish forces.²⁰ Indeed, as Ankara has redoubled its crackdown on Kurdish politicians within Turkey, arresting a number of leading members of the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party,²¹ it has only increased the odds that Turkey's domestic Kurdish conflict will spill over into Syria and undermine the war against ISIS there. In other words, Washington looked the other way on Turkey's domestic fight against the PKK in the hope that this would win greater cooperation in Syria, but it is now Ankara's domestic war with the PKK that is pushing Turkey toward intervening against the YPG.²² Trying to sideline Turkey's domestic challenges in the hope of securing foreign policy cooperation is a strategy that will only fail.

Myth: Washington needs Ankara more than Ankara needs Washington.

While recognizing Washington's rising divergence of values and interests with Ankara's, as well as the limited effectiveness of Americans' efforts to placate their Turkish counterparts, some have nonetheless argued that, given Turkey's importance to achieving key U.S. interests in the Middle East, a conciliatory approach is regrettable but necessary.

In reality, there is only one objective currently undergirding the U.S.-Turkey relationship: ISIS. The centrality of Turkey to the threat posed by the self-proclaimed caliphate also ensures the continued centrality of Turkey to U.S. efforts to defeat the group. Principally, this takes the form of U.S. access to the Turkish airbase at Incirlik. Due to its proximity to the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields, Incirlik is incredibly attractive as a base for U.S. combat, surveillance, and

search-and-rescue air assets. For this reason alone, American policymakers have petitioned Turkey for the right to fly out of Incirlik from the very beginning of the anti-ISIS campaign.²³

Other areas in which Ankara has been seen as critical to U.S. policy include: cracking down on the “jihadist highway” through Turkey, which has provided the single greatest gateway for foreign fighters seeking to join ISIS; closing the over 500-mile-long Turkish-Syrian border, across which ISIS smuggled fighters, arms, and money into Syria and oil, antiquities, and terrorists into Turkey and Europe; using Turkey as a base for training Syrian opposition forces to fight ISIS; and possibly using Turkish forces to help in the ground campaign against ISIS, particularly in the Raqqa offensive. Several things are remarkable about this list.

The first is how slowly, if at all, Turkey has acted on any of them. For almost a year, for example, Ankara resisted granting the United States permission to fly combat missions out of Incirlik.²⁴ This only further underscores the rift between the countries, with Ankara seeing ISIS’s rise as convenient to its purposes in Syria for far too long.

Second, there is little foundation for either U.S. regional policy or its relations with Turkey beyond the ISIS threat. Few of the issues being discussed between Ankara and Washington today look any further down the road than the capture of Raqqa.²⁵ This is strategically myopic; serious regional challenges will persist long after the sun sets on ISIS. A transactional relationship also weakens the U.S. position vis-à-vis Turkey. By signaling how much importance it attaches to defeating ISIS, Washington only encourages Ankara to exact a high price for its cooperation.

Third, American policymakers’ perception of their dependence on Turkey is self-constraining. For example, now that Turkey has relented on Incirlik, the airbase has become more of a vulnerability than an asset for Washington. Fear of losing access to it—which is what effectively occurred for several days after the failed July 15 coup attempt—paralyzes U.S. policy, acting like a check on any critical action or statement, lest it give Erdoğan reason to eject U.S.

forces from the base.²⁶

Finally, one of the most striking ironies of U.S.-Turkish relations in recent months has been that, while Washington was unable to buy Turkish support for its anti-ISIS plans through silence on Turkey’s human rights abuses, the U.S. government has nonetheless been able to continue its cooperation with Syrian Kurds, even violating several of Ankara’s red lines without provoking a major backlash so far. The very fact that, for over a year, American forces have been working with a group whose affiliate is actively killing Turkish soldiers while simultaneously supporting these efforts out of a Turkish airbase is a testament to the degree of leverage that Washington still maintains in its relationship with Ankara. Though Ankara’s patience may lapse at any point, that it has lasted so long is proof that for all Ankara’s anger, it recognizes that it needs the United States, too.²⁷ Even, or perhaps especially, after its efforts to mend ties with Russia, Ankara became distinctly aware of the strength of its eastern neighbor and aware that being forced to confront Russia directly without Western support would be a losing proposition. Ankara may fear that a more decisive break with Washington would lead to even greater U.S. support for the YPG, which would only worsen the problems Turkey faces.

This form of resignation, which has characterized the U.S. approach to Turkey for at least the last two years, only serves as a rationalization for continuing an increasingly desperate status quo, causing Washington to squander the considerable leverage that it has and to undermine its own efforts to increase leverage through sound planning.

Myth: At least an authoritarian Turkey will be stable.

One of the underlying assumptions undergirding Washington’s continued pursuit of Ankara’s cooperation against ISIS is that of Turkish strength, both militarily and politically. Not only does Turkey possess NATO’s second-largest army, after America’s, but it has

been for at least seven decades an oasis of calm amid the turbulent politics of its Middle Eastern neighbors.²⁸ As Syria and Iraq are consumed by sectarian violence, it might bring some policymakers comfort to know that, whatever Erdoğan's failings might be, his firm grip on power could ensure that Turkey remains inoculated from the unrest raging nearby. An extension of the Erdoğan-as-Sisi analogy, this view mistakes authoritarianism for stability.

To the contrary, there is now a distinct risk that Turkey is becoming a fragile state whose continued weakness could undermine U.S. interests across the Middle East. The relatively rapid failure of the July 15 coup attempt spared Turkey from civil war, but its destabilizing effects are still being felt.²⁹ First, it raises the risk of more coup attempts—something that Erdoğan, among others, has already referred to. At the same time, a potential coup also raises another risk: that the countermeasures Erdoğan is taking to forestall this possibility could themselves prove destabilizing. Post-coup purges of the military, the bureaucracy, or the education sector would, even if done with restraint, generate resentment, exacerbate social divisions, and cause serious economic disruptions. The more sweeping these measures become, the more damage they do.³⁰ Now that the coup attempt appears to have convinced Erdoğan that his pre-existing sense of paranoia was justified, it is unlikely that anyone will be able to urge him to use restraint, particularly as many of his fellow AKP members share his fear. In the past month, the government has largely targeted potential members of the Gülen movement, while also trying to incorporate the country's two non-Kurdish opposition parties into a nationalist, post-coup consensus.³¹ But if the opposition parties were to become too strident, they could quickly come under attack.

With many potentially divisive political issues facing Turkey, there are ample opportunities for today's spirit of post-coup unity to crumble. Among the most prominent are those associated with an intensified war against the PKK, a sustained ISIS attack on Turkey, or—possibly in connection with either of those—a gradual or dramatic economic collapse. Following several high-profile

bombings in urban Istanbul and Ankara, the PKK, for its part, has threatened to expand its attacks into Turkey's western cities.³² It has also shown an interest in conducting operations in Antalya, a center of Turkey's tourist industry where such an attack would carry heavy economic costs. ISIS, as well, has declared a new interest in targeting Turkey. In October 2016, ISIS's self-proclaimed caliph declared that ISIS fights would “unleash the fire of their anger” against Turkey, an announcement that coincided with the U.S. State Department evacuating diplomats' families from the country altogether.³³

Further terrorist attacks could play a particularly disruptive role at a delicate moment for Turkey's economy. For years, foreign observers have been predicting that Turkey's economic bubble would burst. So far, Turkey's economy has defied expectations, but the structural factors that make a dramatic readjustment seem likely have only mounted. The Turkish lira has already fallen considerably against the dollar in the past year, presenting a particular risk to sectors of the Turkish economy, like construction, that are heavily leveraged in dollar-denominated debt.³⁴ Rating agencies have also shown growing skepticism about Turkey's economic health, with Moody's downgrading the status of Turkish bonds this past summer.³⁵ At the same time, the Turkish government's continuing post-coup expropriation of Gülenist-held companies and property—as of September, an AKP official boasted that the government had already seized \$4 billion in assets—has raised pressing questions about the rule of law that have understandably frightened foreign investors.³⁶

In other words, if political repression and an accompanying disregard for legal constraints intensifies, possibly exacerbated by more terrorist attacks, the Turkish economy would suffer accordingly. This would further inflame opposition to Erdoğan and perhaps require the government to find even more corrupt means by which to purchase the support of business allies who rely on political largesse. In the worst-case scenario, this would result in more seized property and more crackdowns against the country's parliamentary opposition, driving the country further downward in a vicious cycle of repression, violence, and economic collapse.

A New Policy Framework: Candidly Confront Authoritarianism for the Sake of Stability



As Turkey becomes ever more authoritarian, Washington will continue to face a familiar dilemma in trying to both condemn and cooperate with Erdoğan's government. This dilemma will only be intensified by America's long-standing alliance with Ankara and the optimistic hopes many Americans once had for the possibility of Turkish democracy. In the past year, however, Washington has responded to the challenge of Turkish authoritarianism in the most inconsistent and counterproductive way possible. The Obama administration has alternated between occasional moments of real criticism and shameful efforts to win Turkish cooperation with

pointed silence. Ultimately, it has become clear that U.S. policy currently prioritizes the fight against ISIS, however scant and productive Turkey's contributions to it have been thus far, above the sorry state of Turkish domestic politics.

Since this dilemma will not go away any time soon, both U.S. interests and the long-term health of the U.S.-Turkish relationship itself would be better served by standing the current policy on its head. The incoming administration would do well to recognize the limited benefit that can come from seeking Turkish cooperation in the Middle East and the significant damage to Turkey that can

come from Turkey continuing its destabilizing political, social, and economic dynamics, which squander leverage that could be critical in the future. Finding ways to achieve U.S. regional objectives without Turkey should be the first priority for a new Turkey policy; pivoting U.S. attention toward Turkish domestic politics should be the second.

Given the mounting threats facing Turkey today, regional and internal alike, Washington may ultimately have to play a role maintaining the stability of Turkey itself. This would require Washington to make a concerted effort to stabilize Turkey in the face of growing political, economic, and security threats. An added challenge would be to do so without consolidating the power of Erdoğan—who has done more than anyone else to destabilize the country. Paradoxically, in a worst-case scenario, preserving space for democracy’s eventual return to Turkey requires keeping Erdoğan’s worst impulses in check while at times working with him to prevent Turkey’s descent into chaos. Walking this tightrope will require a clear understanding of the threats Turkey faces, the current government’s role in creating them, and how they can best be addressed.

Washington can mitigate these threats by making it clear in advance that the United States will remain critical of Turkey and keep certain forms of economic and cultural cooperation off the table as long as Turkey remains undemocratic. At the same time, Washington can preempt charges of hypocrisy by also making clear what forms of U.S.-Turkish military cooperation will continue. Preserving Turkey’s NATO membership and continuing its cooperation in northern Syria will still be necessary—not only to ensure key U.S. interests but also to protect Turkey’s stability and, with it, the potential for Turkey’s eventual democratization.

While Erdoğan has done his best to preemptively discredit all criticism from Western sources with charges of hypocrisy, the Turkish government continues to be eager for high-profile

meetings with the U.S. president, as well as visits from prominent American officials. Washington should make it clear that, if Turkey continues to jail journalists or target opponents without regard for the rule of law, the opportunities for such high-profile meetings will be curtailed and, when they occur, will be accompanied by equally high-profile criticism in public and in private.

BPC Recommendations

Recommendation: Do not interfere politically in Gülen extradition case

Whatever promises Ankara may make about improving its cooperation with the United States if only it were to hand over Gülen, doing so would only aggravate the dynamics currently disturbing the U.S.-Turkish relationship and damaging Turkey. It is critical that the United States lead by example and demonstrate to Turkey what the proper rule of law looks like. This requires allowing the Gülen extradition process to play out in U.S. courts and according to the provisions of U.S. laws. Any temptation to interfere in this process, in pursuit of patching up ties with Ankara, must be resisted. It would be as counterproductive as it would be disreputable.

Currently, the debate over Gülen's extradition has already been tainted by the fact that Turkish officials, as well as the Turkish republic, genuinely refuse to believe that the U.S. courts operate independently and outside the power of the executive branch. The result is that, even if the U.S. government, acting in compliance with its own principles, refused to hand over Gülen based on the legally binding decision of a Pennsylvania judge, Turkey would conclude that the decision had been political and respond accordingly. The risk is that if the executive branch were to interfere too forcefully in the Gülen case now, it would only confirm Turkish leaders' belief that the U.S. system operates on the same corrupt terms as Turkey's. This would fundamentally affirm Erdoğan's view that democracy as a value and a practice is a purely cynical discourse used by Western powers to harm Turkey. This will make it impossible for the U.S. administration to explain the inevitable limits of its executive power when future issues arise between Turkey and the United States. Also, Ankara could well demand that the U.S. government end the trial of Reza Zarrab, or assure his acquittal.

Likewise, Ankara could insist that U.S. newspapers publishing articles critical of Turkey be punished as well, just as it already demanded that Germany prosecute a comedian who made fun of Erdoğan on television. Once Washington starts down this road, there will be no satisfying Turkey until the U.S. government becomes as repressive as Erdoğan's.

Recommendation: Increase leverage by pursuing alternatives to Incirlik airbase

In its efforts to prevent Turkey's authoritarian destabilization, the next administration should increase the leverage it already has. The new administration will need to have the foresight to tackle several of the unaddressed issues that continually provide Ankara an unnecessary degree of influence in Washington. For over 50 years, the U.S. military has relied on Incirlik airbase in Turkey, in large part because it was located on the territory of a stable and friendly state. As this reality changes, however, U.S. military planning must adapt accordingly.

Turkey has demonstrated a willingness to leverage U.S. assets at Incirlik to exert pressure on the United States. The most effective way of turning the tables would be to begin looking into alternatives to Incirlik. As explored in previous publications from the Bipartisan Policy Center and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington has access to airbases in Iraq, Jordan, and Cyprus that could fulfill many of the same functions as Incirlik over the short or long term. Taking the first diplomatic and technical steps toward exploring these options would send a powerful signal to Ankara.

Ideally, seeking out alternatives to Incirlik will minimize the possibility that Washington is ever forced to exercise them. If Washington has options, Turkey will face the possibility that threatening to throw American forces out could backfire, leaving

the country even more strategically isolated. In short, a little foresight and planning could turn Incirlik from a source of Turkish leverage over America into a source of American leverage over Turkey.

Recommendation: Contain Ankara's Kurdish conflict in Turkey and Syria

Of all the threats facing Turkey, the conflict between the Turkish government and the PKK has the greatest potential to directly destabilize the country, while also strengthening ISIS. Containing this conflict while pushing back against deepening authoritarianism will require a wise and deliberate allocation of U.S. leverage. An excessive fixation on the short-term war against ISIS risks squandering leverage and in the long term giving ISIS a new lease on life in a destabilized Turkey.

Fighting between Turkey and the PKK, which resumed last summer following failed peace negotiations, shows no sign of abating, and in fact now risks spreading to northern Syria. ISIS, for its part, has pursued a systematic strategy of exacerbating Turkish-Kurdish tensions over the last two years, recognizing that sowing instability in Turkey will be to the group's long-term benefits. In the summer of 2015, an ISIS suicide attack on young Kurdish volunteers en route to rebuild the city of Kobani³⁷ played a key role in restarting the most recent round of fighting between the government and the PKK, which has in turn driven up ISIS recruitment and complicated U.S. counterterrorism policy in Syria.

For Washington, the most severe consequences of Ankara's renewed conflict with the PKK can be felt in Syria, where U.S. policy is simultaneously dependent on Turkish and Kurdish support to defeat ISIS. The YPG, the Syrian Kurdish forces linked to the PKK, continue to be the most, if not the only, effective fighters in the region capable of driving back ISIS and marching on its capital of Raqqa. Thus, Washington's current policy has relied almost exclusively on backing these forces against ISIS. As discussed above, this policy has, to date, proved superficially successful. As Ankara gets angrier, however, and the Syrian

Kurds continue to violate agreed-upon red lines, the possibility for a backlash grows. At worst, having already deployed troops to Syria to block the YPG's advance, Turkey could attack YPG-held territory directly, perhaps in the recently taken but still contested city of Manbij. This would have the disastrous effect of weakening both sides while causing them to turn against each other and ignore ISIS.

Despite occasional proposals in both directions, Washington cannot realistically abandon either Turkey or the Syrian Kurds just to throw its full support behind one or the other. Making a commitment of either sort would create an impossible situation in which the likelihood of direct conflict between both groups would increase and, worse, in which Washington would potentially be forced to go to war with its new client against its former partner.

Recognizing the impossibility of making such a choice, however, Washington's current approach to managing Turkish-YPG tension seems to be to just ignore it. The singular focus of policymakers and voters alike, to the exclusion of all other dynamics in the Middle East, will make it tempting for Washington to simply push ahead with its plans for Raqqa regardless of the potential risks. In response to Turkish concerns, one U.S. administration official put it bluntly: "Turkey needs to support the coalition-backed operation or stay out of the way."

The consequences of this approach, however, are dangerous. By ignoring Ankara's security needs regarding the YPG, Washington increases the possibility of a Turkish-Kurdish conflict that would derail the fight against ISIS. Worse, though, Washington has so far tried to assuage Turkish anger and head off such a possibility by turning a blind eye toward the Turkish government's increasingly authoritarian and destabilizing domestic behavior. In short, by refusing to address Turkey's legitimate concerns, Washington has sacrificed its ability to raise more serious issues about Turkey's future. Turkey's government is currently shuttering newspapers, criminalizing political opposition, and fanning domestic polarization, all of which is driving the country

toward chaos. It will not benefit the United States if it somehow sweeps the Kurdish issue in Syria under the rug in order to manage relations with Turkey only to help detonate an ethnic civil war in southeastern Anatolia. Washington needs to ensure that it uses the political leverage that it has in Turkey to prevent this from happening. Pushing into Raqqa without a plan for managing Turkish-Kurdish tensions risks squandering this leverage in pursuit of a Pyrrhic victory.

The bigger challenge now is how Washington can use its leverage on both sides to de-escalate the current the conflict, keep the possibility of resumed negotiations on the table, and develop a realistic post-ISIS scenario for Syria that it can pressure both sides to accept.

Recommendation: Maintain NATO's commitment to Turkey's territorial integrity

The July 15 coup attempt appears to have accelerated preexisting Turkish efforts to improve ties with Russia and seek out a political solution in Syria with the Bashir al-Assad regime.³⁸ These diplomatic moves, made with an eye toward limiting Kurdish gains, helped facilitate Turkey's intervention last month. But they do not completely eliminate the strategic differences that are still playing out in a congested and strategically sensitive terrain, as well as the corresponding risk of a destabilizing misstep. Around Aleppo, most notably, Turkey continues to provide weapons and money to rebels fighting a brutal battle against Syrian, Russian, and Iranian forces for control of the country's second-largest city.³⁹ Despite much talk of negotiations, there is still no evidence that Ankara is prepared to completely abandon its regional allies or that Assad is prepared to abandon Aleppo. A direct confrontation with the Assad regime or a crisis that disrupts Turkey's rapprochement with Russia would make a political solution in Syria all the more elusive.

Conversely, the difficulty of Turkey's situation is exacerbated by the risk that its efforts to improve relations with Moscow will deepen the already extant rift with NATO and the United States. Russia has shown its eagerness to disrupt the NATO alliance and to exacerbate U.S.-Turkish tension. So far, Turkey has been eager to use its rapprochement with Russia to win concessions from the United States while trying to avoid going so far as to precipitate an open rift. Yet in a worst-case scenario, this dynamic could still be dangerous. Were U.S.-Turkish interests to fundamentally diverge in Syria, perhaps following a deepening conflict with the YPG, and were Russia to seek to capitalize on this by offering real concessions to Ankara's interests, Turkey could be tempted to take steps that would alienate its Western partners for short-term gains that would then leave it dangerously exposed in the face of future Russian pressure. In this context, remaining unwavering in America's NATO commitment to defending Turkey's territorial integrity rather than trying to use this as a bargaining chip will serve as a vital backstop for regional stability.

Recommendation: Make a principled but not provocative recognition of the Armenian genocide

A number of unresolved issues repeatedly surface to either disrupt U.S.-Turkish relations or distract from more substantive and meaningful concerns. Chief among these is the question of whether the events of 1915—in which the Ottoman government organized the systematic killing of as many as a million Armenian citizens—should be considered a “genocide.” It is past time to address this topic definitively, but not punitively.

Numerous times over the last several decades, Congress has debated such proclamations either to express dissatisfaction with Ankara or to assuage domestic constituencies. Similarly, promising to acknowledge the Armenian genocide while in office has long been standard practice for presidential candidates from

both parties, who then walk these promises back when told of the damage it would do to us relations with Turkey.⁴⁰ Perversely, refusing to recognize the genocide for purely political reasons for so many years has created a situation, at a moment of high U.S.-Turkish tensions, in which a presidential statement or congressional resolution on the genocide's highly symbolic April 24th commemoration day would be seen by Turks as a political attack rather than a spur to much-needed self-reflection. Historical matters as serious as genocide, however, are neither effective leverage nor appropriate political footballs.

There is now an opportunity to break out of this cycle by adopting a principled but not provocative approach to the issue: This would entail President Barack Obama, before departing office, publicly acknowledging the Armenian genocide not in a highly anticipated statement but rather in a broader speech, touching on genocide or human rights more broadly and including multiple examples from the 20th century. Such a statement would break a long-standing, problematic taboo and make America's view on this important issue clear, but in a way that is less likely to cause a diplomatic crisis and more likely to encourage Turkey to confront its past.

Most importantly, however, by having an outgoing president make this statement, it would increase the freedom and maneuverability of the incoming administration. It would preempt and minimize the potential for a high-stakes showdown in April—a few short months after inauguration—and the unnecessary bilateral strain that would accompany it. But it would also allow the new administration to deal with the annual Armenian issue in Congress from a better position.

Conclusion: Clarity for a Contradictory Challenge



In confronting the challenge of an increasingly authoritarian Turkey in an increasingly unstable region, Washington needs to be as clear-headed as possible about its interests and options. This requires giving up in the near-term on regional cooperation with Erdoğan and working to increase the leverage the United States can bring to bear on Ankara, while using this leverage to prevent Turkey's slide into an ever-more destabilizing form of autocratic rule. To do this, Washington should be candid from the outset with both its criticism on issues of democracy as well as its commitment to Turkey's defense.

Crucially, American policymakers must recognize that withholding criticism in the hope of securing foreign policy cooperation will not work and that facilitating Turkey's slide into chaos in pursuit of short-term gains against ISIS will come at a dangerous cost.

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Notes





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