

CREATING THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES: THE US CAMPAIGN  
AGAINST ISIS IN SYRIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH-  
AMERICAN RELATIONS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
OF  
MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

BY

BRANDI MEONI

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN  
THE DEPARTMENT OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

JUNE 2022



Approval of the thesis:

**CREATING THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES: THE US CAMPAIGN  
AGAINST ISIS IN SYRIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH-  
AMERICAN RELATIONS**

submitted by **BRANDI MEONI** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of **Master of Science in Middle East Studies, the Graduate School of  
Social Sciences of Middle East Technical University** by,

Prof. Dr. Yaşar KONDAKÇI  
Dean  
Graduate School of Social Sciences

---

Assist. Prof. Dr. Derya GÖÇER  
Head of Department  
Department of Middle East Studies

---

Prof. Dr. Meliha ALTUNIŞIK  
Supervisor  
Department of International Relations

---

**Examining Committee Members:**

Assist. Prof. Dr. Derya GÖÇER (Head of the Examining Committee)  
Middle East Technical University  
Department of Middle East Studies

---

Prof. Dr. Meliha ALTUNIŞIK (Supervisor)  
Middle East Technical University  
Department of International Relations

---

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ayşe ÖMÜR ATMACA  
Hacettepe University  
Department of International Relations

---



**I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.**

**Name, Last Name:** Brandi MEONI

**Signature:**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **CREATING THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES: THE US CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISIS IN SYRIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKISH- AMERICAN RELATIONS**

MEONİ, Brandi

M.S., The Department of Middle East Studies

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Meliha ALTUNIŞIK

June 2022, 104 pages

This thesis seeks to examine the reasons which led the Obama administration to partner with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed People's Protection Units (YPG) in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria, and to describe in what ways the decision has affected bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States (and by extension, NATO). Particular focus is given to Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and alleged shift toward a Eurasianist foreign policy as the result of Turkish-American policy divergence regarding the PYD/YPG.

**Keywords:** Turkish-American Relations, Syria, PYD/YPG, ISIS, Turkish-Russian Relations

## ÖZ

### SURİYE DEMOKRATİK GÜÇLERİ’NİN OLUŞTURULMASI: ABD’NİN SURİYE’DE İŞİD’E KARŞI MÜCADELESİ VE BUNUN TÜRK-AMERİKAN İLİŞKİLERİNE ETKİLERİ

MEONI, Brandi

Yüksek Lisans, Orta Doğu Araştırmaları Bölümü

Tez Yöneticisi: Prof. Dr. Meliha ALTUNİŞİK

Haziran 2022, 104 sayfa

Bu tez, Obama yönetimini Suriye’de Irak Şam İslam Devleti’ne (İŞİD) karşı mücadelede Demokratik Birlik Partisi (PYD) ve silahlı Halk Koruma Birlikleri (YPG) ile iş birliği yapmaya iten sebepleri incelemeyi ve bu politika kararının Türkiye ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) (ve buna bağlı olarak NATO) arasındaki ikili ilişkileri ne şekilde etkilediğini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye ile ABD arasında PYD/YPG’ye ilişkin görüş ayrılığının bir sonucu olarak Türkiye’nin Rusya ile yakınlaşmasına ve Avrasyacı bir dış politikaya doğru kayması iddiasına özellikle odaklanılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri, Suriye, PYD/YPG, İŞİD, Türk-Rus İlişkileri

*To my family and friends...*



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Many thanks to Prof. Dr. Meliha Altunışık for the valuable feedback and guidance.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
ÖZ.....	v
DEDICATION .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	viii
LIST OF MAPS .....	x
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	xii
CHAPTERS	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. US SYRIA POLICY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE US-PYD PARTNERSHIP....	9
2.1. Battle of Kobane: A Turning Point for Turkish-American Cooperation in Syria.....	11
2.2. Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces: The Rebranding of the YPG.....	14
2.3. Democratic Union Party: Its Origins and Connection to the PKK.....	20
2.4. The PYD's Territorial Expansion Amid Syria's Civil War.....	26
2.5. The Dark Side of the PYD: Human Rights Abuses Revealed.....	33
3. CONFLICT IN SYRIA AND THE DECLINE OF TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS.....	38
3.1. Sèvres Syndrome, Turkish Nationalism, and Rising Anti-Americanism.....	38
3.2. The Suruç Bombing: Shifting Threat Perceptions and Policy Objectives.....	43
3.3. Turkish-American Relations Under Trump: The Crisis Over Syria.....	46

3.4. A Change in Strategic Partners: The Turkish-Russian Rapprochement.....	55
3.5. The S-400 Crisis, CAATSA, and the Shift of Axis Debate.....	61
3.6. Decline of Government and Public Support for the Turkish-American Alliance.....	66
4. CONCLUSION.....	73
REFERENCES.....	79
APPENDICES	
A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TRKE ZET.....	93
B. THESIS PERMISSION FORM / TEZ İZİN FORMU.....	104

## LIST OF MAPS

<b>Map 2.1:</b> Staff reports. Satellite images (from Oct. 2012).....	12
<b>Map 2.2:</b> Extent of YPG territorial control in November, 2017.....	32
<b>Map 3.1:</b> The Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920).....	40
<b>Map 3.2:</b> Syria one month after Turkey's Operation Peace Spring.....	54

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

<b>Figure 2.1:</b> “Rehana,” the “Angel of Kobane” .....	18
<b>Figure 2.2:</b> Asia Ramazan Antar, the “Kurdish Angelina Jolie” .....	19
<b>Figure 2.3:</b> KCK Organizational Structure .....	26

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AKP	Justice and Development Party
CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CHP	Republican People's Party
FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAC	Syrian Arab Coalition
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Syrian National Army
SOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
SSB	Presidency of Defense Industries
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although the United States (the US) and Turkey have been NATO allies since 1952, their bilateral relationship is currently facing its most serious crisis of the past seventy years. While myriad issues have contributed to the deteriorated state of their relationship, the most salient among them have stemmed from policy divergences regarding Syria's civil war. Most critical among these divergences has been the US decision to ally with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – in the fight against the Islamic State. The American partnership with the PYD, which became official policy in 2015, has created a severe trust deficit and ongoing pattern of conflict between the two allies.

Accordingly, the aim of this thesis is to describe in what ways the American policy of support for the PYD has affected bilateral ties between Turkey and the US (and by extension, NATO). This research is justified based on the severity of the current rupture between the two NATO allies, and the prominent role that disagreement over the PYD has played in creating that rupture. The scope of this thesis will be strictly descriptive, aiming to delineating the process by which ties between the two countries have arrived at their current state. In doing so, it aims to draw from both US and Turkish perspectives in order to address the following questions: In what ways have policy and discourse regarding the PYD diverged between the US and Turkey? What kind of responses have these divergences generated among political and public circles in each country? And, in what ways have these divergences influenced Turkey's overall strategic orientation? Although policy solutions will remain outside the research scope, the purpose of this thesis is to ultimately provide a foundation on which future analyses and policy solutions can be predicated. To first better understand the

origins of the current crisis, an examination of the historical and political context which led to the Turkish-American divergence in Syria is essential.

In 2009, amid protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the United States “War on Terror,” newly elected President Barack Obama delivered an emotional speech at Cairo University. He generated applause from the crowd as he declared his intentions to “leave Iraq to the Iraqis” and remove all US troops by 2012.<sup>1</sup> Among his domestic audience Obama also inspired feelings of hope for an extrication from the military intervention in Iraq that had proven so costly in American lives, dollars, and credibility.<sup>2</sup> For many in the US and around the world, Obama displayed a welcome tone of humility in contrast to that of his predecessor, George W. Bush, whose administration had been characterized by a militant unilateralist and Manichean foreign policy.

The Bush administration’s 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq – which was launched under spurious pretenses, including allegations of Ba’athist Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s support for Al Qaeda terrorism and concealment of weapons of mass destruction<sup>3</sup> – has since been labeled by many political analysts and pundits as the worst foreign policy decision in United States history.<sup>4</sup> The overthrow of the Ba’ath regime created a failed state and power vacuum in Iraq, leading to insurgency,

---

<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “The President’s Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning,” Obama White House Archives, June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>.

<sup>2</sup> Brandi Meoni, “US Policy in Syria: Implications of Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces,” (unpublished research paper, January 30 2021), typescript.

<sup>3</sup> Colin L. Powell, “Remarks to the United Nations Security Council,” U.S. Department of State Archive, February 5, 2003, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/17300.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Van Buren, “Why the Invasion of Iraq Was the Single Worst Foreign Policy Decision in American History,” The Nation, March 7, 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/why-invasion-iraq-was-single-worst-foreign-policy-decision-american-history/>.



sectarian violence, and “low-level civil war.”<sup>5</sup> Between 2003 and 2011, over 460,000 Iraqi civilians lost their lives, as well as 4,486 American soldiers.<sup>6</sup> In addition to damaging effects on America’s international moral standing and domestic public morale, the consequences for its economic stability were also dire. A 2008 report issued by the US Joint Economic Committee estimated that the cost of the Iraq War had reached \$1.3 trillion,<sup>7</sup> and Bush’s final months in office saw a financial collapse that propelled the national and global economies into deep recession.<sup>8</sup> In light of these bitter experiences in Iraq, US public sentiment became highly intolerant of continued overseas military intervention.

It was under these political and economic circumstances which Barack Obama assumed the office of the presidency in 2009. In many ways the Obama Doctrine was a response to the turbulent years of the Bush era. It sought to redress foreign policy mistakes and avoid the kinds of costly military entanglements that were emblematic of his predecessor’s administration. In Obama’s view, the country was “facing the legacy of an administration that had fundamentally mismanaged American power and employed a unilateralist ethos which had generated more resistance than cooperation”<sup>9</sup> in the War on Terror. It had also recklessly overstretched US military capabilities and precipitated a decline in American global power. Obama’s doctrine, therefore, established key principles based in large part on the failed policies of the Bush administration.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction,” Brookings Institution, December 1, 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-failure-in-iraq-a-retrospective-analysis-of-the-reconstruction/>.

<sup>6</sup> Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus, 2014), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Schumer and Carolyn B. Maloney, “War at any Cost?: The Total Economic Costs of the War Beyond the Federal Budget,” United States Joint Economic Committee, February 2008, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/cache/files/e8a3298d-0007-40c8-9293-8bdb74e6d318/febiraqupdate0.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Gideon Rose, “What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (September/October 2015): 6. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483732>.

<sup>9</sup> Hal Brands, “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy,” *Washington Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (2017): 105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1261557>.

Firstly, Obama promised to practice restraint and a higher level of discernment in the application of US military force. He pledged to send US military personnel into harm's way only when core US interests were at stake. Obama was also acutely aware of the extent to which US military operations could inflame local sensitivities and aid the recruitment efforts of terrorist organizations, and he was therefore averse to the deployment of American boots on the ground. Concurrent with military restraint, Obama pledged to reenergize diplomatic efforts with allies and adversaries alike, signaling a huge shift from the strict unilateralism of the Bush administration.

Given the extent of US economic decline and military overextension, the decisions to scale back the use of force and increase multilateralism in foreign policy were part of Obama's efforts to retain US global leadership in ways which were less resource-intensive and more cost-effective. In pursuit of this goal, Obama developed a "lead from behind" strategy, which encouraged US allies and surrogate fighters to take the lead in conflicts where no core US interests were deemed to be involved.<sup>10</sup> This strategy provided the means by which to lower the cost of military action, keep US troops largely out of harm's way, avoid military entanglements, and prevent potential criticism aimed at the administration by a war-fatigued US public.<sup>11</sup>

Distinction between core and peripheral interests was an essential component of the Obama Doctrine. Grounded in a realistic assessment of America's finite resources and declining global power, it accepted the reality of a changing global system in which US hegemony was now challenged by rising powers such as China. To address these new challenges and maintain US primacy, Obama emphasized the need to reduce commitments in areas of peripheral interest, and to redirect resources to areas of primary concern, such as domestic economic recovery and countering the rise of China. Accordingly, US foreign policy would require a major shift away from nearly

---

<sup>10</sup> Matthias Maass, "The World Views of Barack Obama," in *The World Views of the Obama Era: From Hope to Disillusionment*, ed. Matthias Maass (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Helin Sarı Ertem and Radiye Funda Karadeniz, "Lost in Translation: A System Level Analysis of the Turkish-U.S. Alliance Under the Obama and Trump Administrations, *Perceptions* 24, no. 1 (2019): 19-20. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/10c6a91c165fc946be0d6fe95bdb46c1/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=237752>.

three decades of deep involvement in the Middle East, and a reorientation toward Asia Pacific, which was emerging as the new center of “global economic and military dynamism.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, with the election of Barack Obama began a period of intended US retrenchment in the Middle East.

It wasn’t long, however, before unprecedented events drew US attention back to the region. The Arab Spring uprisings, starting in 2010, seemingly caught the world off guard, as long-standing authoritarian leaders were toppled in Tunisia and Egypt. The uprisings produced a different result in Syria, leading to civil war and a weakening of the state’s territorial control. These conditions in Syria – along with political instability in neighboring Iraq resulting from the US occupation – allowed for the alarming rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Islamic State was unique in its level of brutality. It had evolved from Al Qaeda in Iraq, a group “repudiated by the worldwide Al Qaeda high command as too indiscriminately violent.”<sup>13</sup> Its barbaric attacks on civilians in the region, and gruesome executions of Westerners prompted then US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to claim that ISIS was “beyond anything that we’ve seen.”<sup>14</sup>

By late 2014, the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate stretched 40,000 square miles of territory across Iraq and Syria.<sup>15</sup> Despite the Obama administration’s determination to retrench from the Middle East, the Islamic State’s vast territorial expansion, sensational displays of violence, and incitement of attacks on Western citizens made non-intervention an impossibility. Yet despite the critical situation, Obama refrained from putting American combat troops on the ground. In September of 2014, he publicly announced the creation of a global coalition to “degrade and ultimately

---

<sup>12</sup> Brands, “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy,” 108.

<sup>13</sup> Unger, “The Foreign Policy Legacy of Barack Obama,” 9.

<sup>14</sup> Rose, “What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On,” 11.

<sup>15</sup> Brett McGurk, “Hard Truths in Syria: America Can’t Do More with Less, and it Shouldn’t Try,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May/June 2019): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-04-16/hard-truths-syria>.

destroy” ISIS.<sup>16</sup> In his statements Obama emphasized the limitations of America’s role in the coalition, reassuring the US public that the country would not be “dragged into another ground war.”<sup>17</sup> Much in line with Obama’s lead from behind policies, his anti-ISIS strategy would rely primarily on the US-led coalition’s air strikes in support of local surrogate fighters on the ground.

Within a matter of days after the announcement of the global coalition, international attention turned to the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab), which had come under attack by ISIS. In what proved to be a watershed event, and a major test of the coalition’s viability, ISIS was repelled from Kobane after a fierce four-month battle. Also significant was the recognition by US Special Forces of the efficient fighting capabilities of the Kurdish group that defended the town – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed People’s Protection Units (YPG). By 2015, designation of the YPG as the United States’ ground force against ISIS in Syria became official policy. While the US-PYD/YPG partnership was extremely beneficial in meeting the objectives of Obama’s retrenchment policy – conducting military operations at reduced cost and endangerment to US personnel – it was problematic for one significant reason. The Pentagon was well aware of the group’s connection to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),<sup>18</sup> an entity which the US State Department had designated as a foreign terrorist organization in 1997.<sup>19</sup>

The PKK has waged an armed campaign against the government of NATO ally Turkey for more than 30 years, in a conflict which has claimed 40,000 lives.<sup>20</sup> Turkey, which

---

<sup>16</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” Obama White House Archives, September 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/Statement-president-isil-1>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “U.S. Senator Graham Criticizes U.S. Military Strategy in Syria,” Senate Armed Services Committee, May 5, 2016, 0:02 to 1:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-g8RVtYBM4>.

<sup>19</sup> “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” US Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

<sup>20</sup> Murat Sofuoğlu, “Who are the Kurds?”, TRT World, June 1, 2018, [https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/who-are-the-kurds--17915?utm\\_source=Facebook&utm\\_medium=Organic&utm\\_campaign=Turkey+Elections&utm\\_content=who-are-the-kurds](https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/who-are-the-kurds--17915?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Organic&utm_campaign=Turkey+Elections&utm_content=who-are-the-kurds).

holds a valuable geostrategic position and contributes the second largest military force to NATO, has long been a vital US ally. However, the American policy of support to the PYD, and by extension the Middle East retrenchment strategy in which it was rooted, have created a severe trust deficit between the two countries, and led to a deep deterioration of their bilateral relationship.

Chapter two of this thesis will examine the events and circumstances which led the Obama administration to partner with the PYD in the fight against ISIS despite its known links to the PKK terrorist organization. It will also delineate the process by which the United States rebranded the YPG as the “Syrian Democratic Forces” in order to obscure their true identity and lionize them as ISIS-fighting heroes in the eyes of the US and global public. Furthermore, it will explain how partnership with the US contributed to the PYD/YPG’s emergence as the dominant actor in northern Syria, and address some the negative aspects of the group’s expansion, such as allegations of human rights violations within the areas under its control. Lastly, this chapter will address the PYD/YPG’s aspirations for political autonomy in Northern Syria in accordance with the ideological model of democratic confederalism.

Chapter three of this thesis will focus on Turkey’s concerns for its national security and territorial integrity in the face of US armament of the YPG, starting with the Obama administration and continuing under his successor, Donald Trump. It will also highlight the growing mistrust between the US and Turkey as their priorities diverged, leading Turkey to militarily intervene in Syria on three separate occasions (between 2016-2019) to target YPG positions. This chapter will also delineate the process by which Turkey’s strained relations with the US led to rapprochement with Russia in efforts to meet its objectives in Syria and counterbalance US policies. Finally, it will examine the extent to which Turkey’s cooperation with Russia – and its purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system – have created alarm in the West and reignited debate over Ankara’s alleged shift toward Eurasia.

Finally, the fourth and concluding chapter will discuss the main outcomes of American support for the PYD/YPG, and how they have affected the overall status of Turkey’s

relations with the US and NATO. The thesis will conclude with a brief discussion of the potential for US-Turkey convergence over the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, as Washington and Ankara look to mend their strained relationship.

## CHAPTER 2

### US SYRIA POLICY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE US-PYD PARTNERSHIP

Almost from the beginning of Obama's presidency, unforeseen events challenged his realist plans to disengage from the ill-fated regime change and nation-building strategies that had characterized Middle East foreign policy in the Bush era. As the Arab Spring uprisings spread to Syria in 2011, Bashar al-Assad's brutal repression of protests and refusal to step down as Syria's president brought regime change back to the Middle East agenda. One of the strongest proponents of regime change in Syria was then Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose attempts to persuade Assad to cease violent attacks on protestors and implement necessary reforms went entirely unheeded.<sup>21</sup> In concert with Erdoğan, Obama repeatedly called for Assad to step down, and the two leaders initially aligned on the desire for Assad's removal.

Believing Assad's fall would be swift,<sup>22</sup> Ankara and Washington supported the opposition Free Syrian Army, and established a control room in Istanbul to coordinate military activities and funnel arms to favored anti-Assad forces.<sup>23</sup> However, a divergence in priorities soon emerged between the US and Turkey as the war progressed without Assad's departure. While Turkey was pressing the US for direct intervention to oust Assad from power in the face of what had become a bloodbath in Syria, Obama was becoming less sanguine about the prospect of regime change and the arming of opposition groups. Obama's unwillingness to intervene against Assad became exceedingly clear in 2013 when the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons

---

<sup>21</sup> Willian Hale, "Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26842776>.

<sup>22</sup> Burcu Sarı Karademir, "A Dance of Entanglement," *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 16, no. 62 (2019): 35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26664884>.

<sup>23</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 94.

on civilians, in blatant transgression of Obama's stated 'red line,' failed to produce US retaliation. Turkey, already dissatisfied with Washington's inaction in Syria, reached a new level of disappointment.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, Obama's refusal to directly intervene against Assad, even under such extenuating circumstances, may be unsurprising when viewed through his retrenchment policies, which were designed to keep the US distant from military escalation and entanglement in the Middle East. Obama feared that the removal of Assad could create an unpredictable political vacuum that would draw the US further into the conflict.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Obama administration began to have serious concerns about arming Syrian rebels, fearing their involvement with jihadist groups such as Al-Nusra Front and Al Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> In addition to these concerns, intervention against Assad threatened another important tenet of Obama's foreign policy – to increase diplomacy with allies and adversaries alike. By 2013, the US had become engaged in intense negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, and Obama was cautious not to jeopardize these efforts by targeting Assad, an ally to whom Tehran was providing support.<sup>27</sup>

However, with the rise of ISIS and its attack on Kobane in late 2014, the US Department of Defense would be alerted to the YPG, a surrogate force whose secular outlook and tolerance to the Assad regime would provide the US "boots on the ground" without the fear of empowering jihadists or provoking diplomatic fallout with Iran. Unfortunately, partnership with the PKK-aligned YPG would come with one significant cost – the further alienation of Turkey.

---

<sup>24</sup> Kılıç Kanat and Kadir Üstün, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria," *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 4 (2015): 91. [https://www.academia.edu/28159701/U.S.-Turkey\\_Realignment\\_on\\_Syria](https://www.academia.edu/28159701/U.S.-Turkey_Realignment_on_Syria).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Crowley, "Crisis in Syrian City Exposes Fissures in Obama's Anti-ISIS Coalition," *Time Magazine*, October 10, 2014, <https://time.com/3491192/obama-isis-kobani/>.

<sup>26</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?" *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (March 2013): 310. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23473538>.

<sup>27</sup> Dania Koleilat Khatib and Ayman Saleh Al-Barasneh, "US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)," in *The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations*, ed. Dania Koleilat Khatib (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 20.



## **2.1. Battle of Kobane: A Turning Point for Turkish-American Cooperation in Syria**

The rise of the Islamic State marked a new chapter in Syria's civil war, and a change in America's strategic objectives. Having evolved into a global threat and primary US security concern by 2014, the Obama administration had made the defeat of ISIS its sole priority in Syria. The US-led coalition had already begun a campaign of ISIS-targeted airstrikes when the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane – defended by the YPG – came under attack in mid-September. As ISIS advanced on Kobane, and a wave of refugees flooded across the Turkish border, mounting media pressure helped convince the US to focus its efforts in support of the besieged town.<sup>28</sup> The US's provision of aerial support to YPG forces on the ground led to the expulsion of ISIS from Kobane after four months of intense fighting.

The victory in Kobane was significant for a number of reasons. First, it struck a blow to ISIS's perceived invincibility, and thus its attractiveness to potential recruits.<sup>29</sup> It also affirmed the viability of the coalition's strategy to defeat ISIS with airstrikes, and portended a sign of things to come for the terrorist organization.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, as ISIS had become universally reviled, its defeat in Kobane brought international recognition and legitimacy to the town's defenders – the YPG. This recognition was not lost on Kurds in the region, for whom Kobane became a symbol of Kurdish nationalism and resistance.<sup>31</sup> Yet, while the efforts in Kobane had resulted in a hard-fought victory, and a manifestation of the coalition's effectiveness, the refusal of Ankara to play a larger role in the operation to save Kobane generated significant scrutiny.

---

<sup>28</sup> Aron Lund, "Why the Victory in Kobane Matters," Carnegie Middle East Center, February 13, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59061>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo: Five Reasons the Battle for Kobane Matters," Carnegie Middle East Center, October 10, 2014, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/56905>.



Map 1: Staff reports. Satellite images (from Oct. 2012): Google Earth<sup>32</sup>

With Kobane lying just south of its border, Turkey came under sharp international criticism for failing to provide military assistance in the town’s defense. Although officially committed to the US-led operations, Turkey had “kept aloof from the anti-ISIS coalition of Arab and Western countries assembled by Washington,”<sup>33</sup> and denied the use of İncirlik Air Base unless Syrian regime forces were targeted.<sup>34</sup> This necessitated the coalition’s use of more distant military bases, and the air-dropping of supplies to the town’s YPG defenders while the Turkish military looked on in clear view of the unfolding conflict.<sup>35</sup>

However, Turkey’s decision to remain distant from the conflict was not without reason. From the outset, Erdoğan had clearly expressed Ankara’s view that the YPG and the PKK were one and the same. For Ankara, Kobane was a showdown between two terrorist organizations, both of which constituted a national security threat to

<sup>32</sup> “Key Battlegrounds in the Fight for Kobane,” Wall Street Journal, October 20, 2014, <http://graphics.wsj.com/annotations/kobani-map>.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Park, “Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey’s Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas,” *International Journal* 71, no. 3 (September 2016): 456. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26414042>.

<sup>34</sup> Turkey initially asserted that its actions were restricted due to 49 hostages abducted from the Turkish Consulate in Mosul and held in captivity by ISIS. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29291946>.

Turkey. Erdoğan also expressed his concerns that the arms supplied to the YPG in defense of Kobane could end up in the hands of PKK militants.<sup>36</sup> Yet despite declining a combat role, Turkey did provide assistance to Kobane in two important ways. First, by giving refuge to the more than 180,000 Kurds forced to flee the conflict as ISIS advanced,<sup>37</sup> and also by allowing a contingent of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga fighters to transit Turkish territory to assist the YPG in lifting the siege.

For critics in Washington, however, this was not enough. Many started to question the kind of role Turkey could play in a coalition whose sole objective was the defeat of ISIS.<sup>38</sup> It had become clear during the battle of Kobane that, while Turkey also considered ISIS a terrorist organization, it did not attach the same level of priority to the group's defeat. Rather, Ankara favored a comprehensive Syria strategy that would address the Assad regime as the root of the broader conflict that produced ISIS.<sup>39</sup> In addition to Assad's removal, Turkey prioritized the containment of the PYD/YPG, which had become newly empowered as a result of the Syrian conflict.<sup>40</sup> With the battle of Kobane, this divergence of priorities between the US and Turkey had risen to the surface, and a clear trust deficit now existed between the two allies.

The trust deficit would only widen in the aftermath of the battle for Kobane, as the Pentagon was unwilling to renounce its partnership with the YPG. Not only had the battle revealed a growing polarization between the US and Turkey, but it had also alerted US Special Forces to the effective fighting capabilities of the YPG. Though the US recognized the group's links to the PKK as problematic, the Pentagon declined to

---

<sup>36</sup> Bill Park, "Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?" *International Affairs* 491, no. 3 (May 2015): 586. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24539148>.

<sup>37</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu and Selim C. Sazak, "Business as Usual: The U.S.-Turkey Security Partnership," *Middle East Policy* 12, no. 4 (2015): 100. DOI:[10.1111/mepo.12161](https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12161).

<sup>38</sup> Wilkens, *A Kurdish Alamo: Five Reasons the Battle for Kobane Matters*.

<sup>39</sup> Kanat and Üstün, *U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> To be discussed further in Chapter 3.

relinquish them as a military asset,<sup>41</sup> and support for the YPG began to greatly expand in 2015. Given that the group possessed the needed military prowess, secular character, and non-combative stance toward the Assad regime, the Obama administration was ultimately prepared to overlook its links to a State Department designated terrorist organization.

## **2.2. Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces: The Rebranding of the YPG**

Instrumental in converting the YPG to a so called “US enabler on the ground” was Brett McGurk, the Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS. In a 2019 Foreign Affairs article, McGurk cited Turkey’s lack of cooperation in the fight against ISIS as a principal reason for which the US consolidated its partnership with the YPG.<sup>42</sup> In the article, McGurk claimed that Turkey was “a problematic partner from the outset of the anti-ISIS campaign,” not only failing to assist the efforts in Kobane, but also refusing to close border crossings with Syria “through which ISIS fighters and materials flowed freely.”<sup>43</sup> Due to this alleged intransigence, US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) sought to work more closely with the YPG.

McGurk, as well as SOCOM commander Raymond Thomas, were acutely aware of the need to obfuscate the YPG’s links to the PKK in order to gain legitimacy both for the group, and for Washington’s policy to arm and support it as a proxy force against ISIS.<sup>44</sup> They also anticipated the need to deflect the heavy criticism that would undoubtedly come from Turkey in response to their planned initiative. Therefore, in 2015 McGurk and Thomas proceeded to “rebrand” the YPG for American strategic purposes.<sup>45</sup> At the Aspen Institute Security Forum in 2017, Thomas publicly recounted

---

<sup>41</sup> Lund, *Why the Victory in Kobane Matters*.

<sup>42</sup> McGurk, *Hard Truths in Syria: America Can’t Do More with Less, and it Shouldn’t Try*.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Thomas, “SOCOM: Policing the World,” Aspen Institute, July 21, 2017, 26:05 to 26:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCqCnLjSx7M>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 25:03 to 25:52.

this process. Instructing the group to “change their brand,” he asked them, “What do you want to call yourselves besides the YPG?”<sup>46</sup> After announcing that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Thomas credited them with “a stroke of brilliance” for adding the word democracy to their new moniker.<sup>47</sup> Thomas also recalls asking the group to recruit Arabs to their ranks, undoubtedly to dilute the Kurdish character of the proxy force and create an even greater illusion of distinctiveness from the PKK.<sup>48</sup>

The attachment of Arab units to the YPG was also a legal necessity. As the YPG constituted the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party, the Syrian affiliate of the terrorist designated PKK, it did not meet the vetting standards for receipt of US weaponry and support.<sup>49</sup> However, by merging units of the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) to the YPG core, an entity was created for which SOCOM could legally provide arms. Officially, the US would be supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, not the YPG or the PKK.<sup>50</sup> The maintenance of this policy therefore required the continued portrayal of organizational distinctiveness between the SDF and the YPG. On the rare occasions in which US officials have publicly acknowledged the relationship between the SDF’s core component (YPG) and the PKK, it is typically described as solely an ideological bond.<sup>51</sup> The assertion that the PYD/YPG is an indigenous Syrian organization operating outside the PKK’s command is a common refrain in Western political and media circles.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 25:49 to 25:54.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 25:52 to 26:02.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 27:49 to 28:03.

<sup>49</sup> Aaron Stein, “Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward,” Atlantic Council, July 2017, 9. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/partner-operations-in-syria/>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Recep Tayyip Teke, “The Kurds of Northern Syria in Western Media: The BBC and VOA coverage (2014-2018),” MSc thesis, (Middle East Technical University, 2020). <http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12624875/index.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Till F. Paasche and Michael M. Gunter, “Revisiting Western Strategies Against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” *Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (2016): 10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43698617>.

While US officials determined methods by which to conceal the undesirable characteristics of the YPG, they simultaneously adopted techniques with which to market the newly created SDF to domestic and international publics. In doing so, the US Central Command's communications department focused on highlighting the group's successes in fighting ISIS, while also drawing particular attention to its multiethnic composition. One such newsletter states:

Our partnership with the SDF is a unique and powerful example of the success of our by-with-through' approach to counterterrorism ... the US military, with coalition support, has partnered with, trained, equipped and enabled the SDF. It grew from a force of a few hundred in 2015, to a thousands-strong multiethnic force of Syrians that includes Arabs, Kurds, Syriac and other ethnic groups.<sup>53</sup>

In line with the official US government policy, Western media organizations began to publish statements and images that reinforced the SDF's favorable characterization. This was often achieved by focusing on aspects of democratic confederalism, the ideology that the YPG had inherited from PKK leader and founder, Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>54</sup> Fundamental to democratic confederalism are the concepts of stateless direct democracy, egalitarianism, feminism and ecological themes.<sup>55</sup> By associating the SDF with such universalist liberal values, an idealistic image of what the group stood for was created. Media and political circles were thus instrumental in spreading the narrative of the SDF's "shared Western understanding of human and women's rights."<sup>56</sup>

Rendering the favorable characterization most effective was its emphasis on the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the YPG's all-female militia. Focusing on the

---

<sup>53</sup> Jim Garamone, "Building Capabilities, Nurturing Alliances at Heart of U.S. Strategy," Department of Defense, June 27, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1890082/building-capabilities-nurturing-alliances-at-heart-of-us-strategy/>.

<sup>54</sup> Kyle Orton, "The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): 159. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26469849>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Paasche and Gunter, *Revisiting Western Strategies Against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*, 10.

feminist aspect of the group's democratic confederalist ideology, Western journalists often portrayed the YPJ as a symbol of global feminism, women's empowerment, and the fight against patriarchy.<sup>57</sup> This view is exemplified in a 2014 *Newsweek* article which refers to YPJ fighters as "the Kurdish angels of Kobani," and relates the fight against ISIS to a broader struggle against "the patriarchy that pervades the region."<sup>58</sup> Referring to the PKK as simply "the Kurdish movement," the article makes no mention of the organization's terrorist designation, but rather glorifies female PKK fighters as leaders of a regional feminist movement, clearly reinforcing American discourse on the group's egalitarian struggle.

According to Kurdish activist and academic Dilar Dirik, caricaturizations of Kurdish female fighters are made effective due to preconceived Orientalist notions of Eastern women as oppressed victims. For this reason, Western media sensationalizes the ways in which female PKK fighters defy such notions, in an attempt to make them stand out as a novel phenomenon in the region.<sup>59</sup> Providing clear evidence of Dirik's assertions, Western media coverage of the YPJ often bordered on Hollywood sensationalism. In articles and social media posts which were entirely void of political context, the personas of two particular YPJ fighters took on mythical and legendary proportions.

The first was a young woman called "Rehana," photographed in Kobane and interviewed by Swedish journalist Carl Drott in September of 2014. As the Battle of Kobane drew international attention, so did her photograph. After her image went viral, a legend formed around the mysterious woman, now being called "The angel of Kobane."<sup>60</sup> Along with her new moniker, she was credited with the single-handed

---

<sup>57</sup> Meoni, *US Policy in Syria: Implications of Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces*.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Smith, "The Kurdish 'Angels of Kobane' are Fighting on a Second Front," *Newsweek*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/19/angels-kobane-are-fighting-second-front-290835.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Dilar Dirik, "Western Fascination with 'Badass' Kurdish Women," *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/29/western-fascination-with-badass-kurdish-women>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



slaying of 100 ISIS fighters.<sup>61</sup> The second woman, 19-year-old Asia Ramazan Antar, was dubbed “the Angelina Jolie of Kurdistan.”<sup>62</sup> When she was killed fighting ISIS in 2016, news of her death was reported around the world, focusing more on her physical traits than the causes for which she died.



Fig. 1: “Rehana,” the “Angel of Kobane”<sup>63</sup>

Whether through critiques of democratic confederalism’s feminist aspects, or by pure sensationalism alone, the women of the YPJ became heroines for many in the West and around the world. Particularly as reports of ISIS’s unspeakable violence against women were inundating Western media, these reports were juxtaposed with images of

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Jiyar Gol, “Kurdish ‘Angelina Jolie’ Devalued by Media Hype,” BBC News, September 12, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37337908>.

<sup>63</sup> “Who is the ‘Angel of Kobane’?” BBC Trending, November 3, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-29853513>.



the YPJ's seemingly empowered female fighters, thereby enhancing their reputation as heroines.<sup>64</sup>



Fig.2: Asia Ramazan Antar, the “Kurdish Angelina Jolie”<sup>65</sup>

The socially constructed separation of the SDF's core Kurdish components from the PKK, as well as their favorable characterization as the world's ISIS-fighting heroes, created a crisis of confidence in Turkish-American relations.<sup>66</sup> Adding to Turkey's frustration was the American media's usage of the terms 'the Kurds' and 'the Syrian Kurds' when referencing the YPG. Such usage created the impression of a monolithic Kurdish society in which the PYD/YPG was the sole representative of all Kurdish people, and it ignored the existence of Kurdish parties operating across the political spectrum in Syria.<sup>67</sup> The usage also generated an impression of Turkish hostility

---

<sup>64</sup> Meoni, *US Policy in Syria: Implications of Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces*.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Kanat and Üstün, *U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria*, 92.

<sup>67</sup> Mohannad Al-Kati, “The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study,” *AlMuntaqa* 2, no. 1 (2019): 52-54. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.31430/almuntaqa.2.1.0045>.

towards ethnic Kurds in general, rather than the YPG/PKK militias specifically. These insinuations led Turkish President Erdoğan to address the issue in a Wall Street Journal op-ed, in which he stated:

Our mission is simultaneously to combat the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the terrorist organization known as the PKK, along with its Syrian affiliates ... Turkey has no argument with any ethnic or religious group. From our perspective, all citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic – who don't belong to terrorist groups – are equal. In particular, we object to equation of the PKK with Syrian Kurds.<sup>68</sup>

As the SDF (and thereby the YPG) gained international legitimacy through American public relations efforts and successes fighting ISIS, Turkey's threat perceptions increased significantly, leading the Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership to openly accuse Washington of supporting anti-Turkish terrorist groups. The Obama administration, in turn, accused Ankara of dragging its feet against ISIS.<sup>69</sup> These dueling accusations revealed the divergent threat perceptions and growing trust deficit between the US and Turkey by the end of 2015, both of which would be exacerbated as the SDF began to extend its territorial control over much of northern Syria with the help of Washington. The Obama administration's low-liability strategy in which surrogate fighters had replaced US boots on the ground was proving effective at fighting ISIS with diminished costs and risks to US personnel. However, it would soon engender broader conflicts, not only between the US and Turkey, but also among the PYD/YPG and the non-Kurdish populations which came under the group's control.

### **2.3. Democratic Union Party: Its Origins and Connection to the PKK**

The campaigns undertaken by US Central Command and Western media outlets to lionize the Syrian Democratic Forces as heroes in the fight against ISIS were

---

<sup>68</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Turkey is Stepping Up Where Others Fail to Act," Wall Street Journal, October 14, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-is-stepping-up-where-others-fail-to-act-11571093850>.

<sup>69</sup> Didem Buhari Gülmez, "The resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perception and Worldviews," *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (June 2020): 477. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777038>.

successful in gaining support for the group in the eyes of American and international publics. While this success relied heavily on the projection of the SDF's pro-Western and secular identity, it was equally dependent on masking the undesirable aspects of the group's core component, the YPG, whose ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party were well documented. As the YPG's partnership with the US facilitated its receipt of weapons and training – and ultimately its territorial expansion – an examination of the group's origins, terrorist links, and political objectives is essential to understanding the risks and ramifications of the US supported PYD/YPG empowerment in northern Syria.

The origins of the Democratic Union Party and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units, begin with the 1978 inception of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Diyarbakır, Turkey.<sup>70</sup> Adopting as its ideology an amalgamation of Marxist-Leninism, Kurdish nationalism-separatism, and a cult of personality around its leader and founder, Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's main objective was the establishment of an independent Kurdistan carved out of the four countries with significant Kurdish minorities – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>71</sup> To this end, Öcalan advocated armed struggle against the Turkish state.

Soon after the PKK's founding, speculations of an impending military coup began to circulate in Turkey, compelling Öcalan to relocate to Syria, where he continued to carry out the organization's activities.<sup>72</sup> When the *coup d'état* was effectuated in September of 1980, hundreds of PKK militants also made their escape to Syria, fleeing a post-coup crackdown which was particularly brutal on Turkey's leftist elements.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Soner Çagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2017), 147.

<sup>71</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 158.

<sup>72</sup> Teke, *The Kurds of Northern Syria in Western Media: The BBC and VOA coverage (2014-2018)*, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Çagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, 147.

Regrouping in Syria, the PKK received extensive assistance from Hafez Al-Assad,<sup>74</sup> who provided sanctuary to Öcalan and allowed PKK cadres to receive military training in Beka'a Valley camps established by Palestinian leftist organizations.<sup>75</sup> For Assad, the PKK served as an instrument with which to gain political leverage over Turkey. Since Syria's independence in 1946, tensions had existed between the two countries over Turkey's 1939 annexation of Hatay province,<sup>76</sup> and later conflict arose over the distribution of water sharing from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.<sup>77</sup> Through support for the PKK, Assad hoped to gain political concessions in Syria's disputes with Turkey.

Thus, with a new base in Syria, the PKK began its armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984, aiming to carry out Öcalan's vision of an independent Kurdistan. "The PKK's insurgent terrorist tactics – a vast centrally directed campaign of systematic atrocities against Kurds who resisted their program and anyone else identified as a 'state agent' – amounted to crimes against humanity."<sup>78</sup> The Turkish state's response to the insurgency was equally heavy handed, with disappearances, torture, and extra-judicial killings recorded regularly according to the European Commission.<sup>79</sup> By the early 1990s, the PKK began to target Turkey's tourism industry, kidnapping foreign tourists and launching deadly bomb attacks on popular tourist sites.<sup>80</sup> Thus, when

---

<sup>74</sup> Hafez Al-Assad's presidency lasted until his death in 2000, upon which his son Bashar inherited the presidency.

<sup>75</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 158.

<sup>76</sup> Soner Çağaptay and Tyler Evans, "The End of Pax Adana," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 25, 2012, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/end-pax-adana>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 158.

<sup>79</sup> Paul K. Davis et al., *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012), 101.

<sup>80</sup> Greg Bruno, "Inside the Kurdistan Worker's Party," Council on Foreign Relations, October 19, 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk>.

Western governments began to proscribe the PKK as a terrorist organization, they did so not only in solidarity with Turkey, but also in line with their own security interests.<sup>81</sup>

The PKK's war with the Turkish state had reached its height by the mid-1990s. Hundreds of villages were destroyed in the country's southeast,<sup>82</sup> and the area remained under martial law, with at least one-third of Turkey's sizable army stationed there at all times.<sup>83</sup> By 1998, the Turkish government had reached its limit. Massing troops along the border, Turkey threatened Assad with direct military intervention into Syria. Facing the pressure of an impending attack, Syria signed the Adana Protocol, agreeing to expel Öcalan and cease all support for the PKK.<sup>84</sup> The following year, Öcalan was arrested in Kenya by Turkish agents (with the help of US intelligence) and brought back to Turkey, where he now serves a life sentence in İmralı prison. The period following Öcalan's capture would mark a new phase in the evolution of the PKK. The organization observed a five-year ceasefire, in which time it sought to reinvent itself politically.

The September 11 attacks of 2001 were particularly influential in the PKK's orientational change. In the political environment created by the subsequent "War on Terror," Öcalan recognized the need to disassociate the PKK from its terrorist past.<sup>85</sup> To this end, he claimed to shift away from the organization's Marxist roots and separatist aspirations, adopting instead the ideology of democratic confederalism. The confederal concept rejects the nation state model, and calls for self-organization into local autonomous associations in which democracy, the environment, ethnic pluralism,

---

<sup>81</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> Bruno, *Inside the Kurdistan Workers' Party*.

<sup>83</sup> Park, *Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey's Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas*, 462.

<sup>84</sup> İsmail Cem, "Statement Made by İsmail Cem, Foreign Minister, On the Special Security Meeting Held Between Turkey and Syria," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 20, 1998, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/p\\_statement-made-by-ismail-cem\\_-foreign-minister\\_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria\\_br\\_october-20\\_-1998\\_br\\_unofficial-translation\\_p\\_en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/p_statement-made-by-ismail-cem_-foreign-minister_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria_br_october-20_-1998_br_unofficial-translation_p_en.mfa).

<sup>85</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 159.

and women's rights are protected. In effect, it rejects separatism and the formation of an independent Kurdistan in favor of institutions and structures with local buy-in that would overlap existing boundaries without formally revoking the sovereignty of the state.<sup>86</sup> To reflect Öcalan's ideological shift, the PKK would implement a new confederal model in each of the four countries where it operates, creating entities that were marketed as more localist.<sup>87</sup>

In 2003, the Democratic Union Party was established as the PKK's Syrian offshoot, led by Salih Muslim.<sup>88</sup> Although the PKK's activities had been constrained with the signing of the Adana agreement – in which Syria was obliged to end its support to the organization – the PYD's establishment revealed the continued presence of the PKK and its sympathizers in the Kurdish areas of Syria, a result of the organization's long integration with the Assad regime.<sup>89</sup> Ostensibly, the PYD is a separate entity, arguing that its ties to the PKK are merely ideological and that it is free to pursue its own localist agenda. In reality, however, the PYD remains under the control of PKK leadership.

At its fifth congress in 2005 the PKK inaugurated the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization encompassing the PKK and its affiliates in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. At the top of the KCK's pyramidal structure is Öcalan, retaining command over the organization's component groups. Öcalan's dominance of the KCK is evident in three of the eight duties prescribed to the organization's members: to regard the freedom of President Apo (Öcalan) as his reason to live, to internalize the APOist thought and fight against everything that contradicts it, and to implement

---

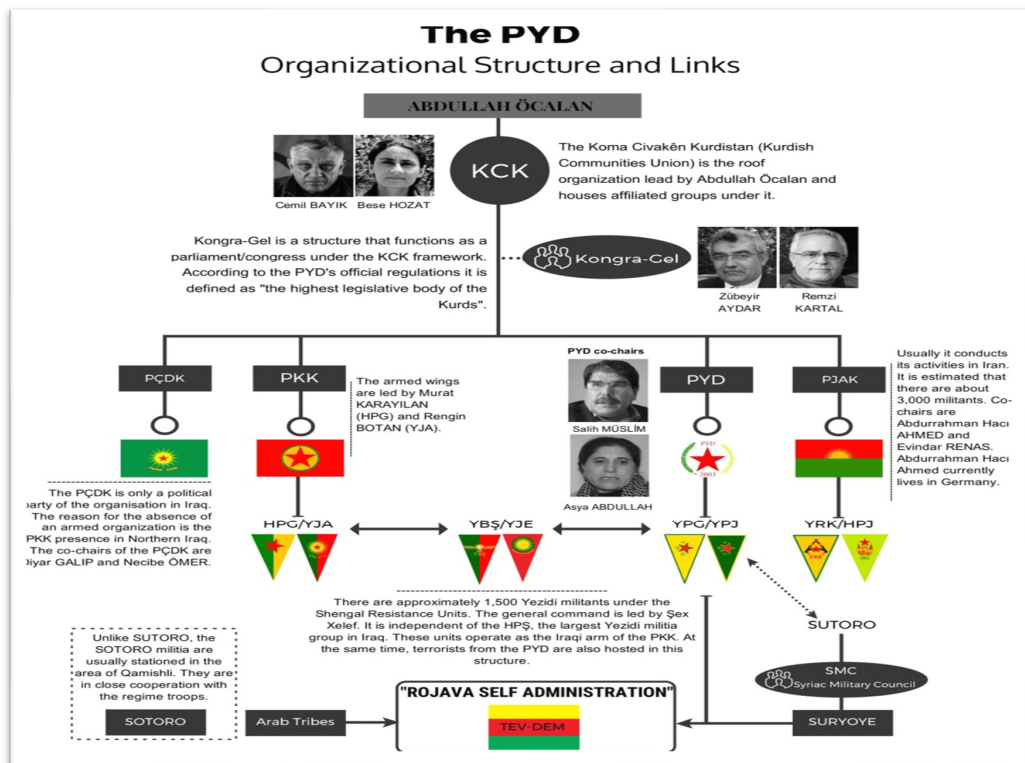
<sup>86</sup> Michael Rubin, "Kurdistan Rising? Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region," American Enterprise Institute, July 1, 2016, 43. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep03254.6>.

<sup>87</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 159.

<sup>88</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 125.

<sup>89</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 160.

policies and tactics determined by the party leadership (meaning Öcalan specifically).<sup>90</sup>



**Fig. 3: KCK Organizational Structure**<sup>91</sup>

The PYD's ties to the PKK go further than a shared cult worship of Öcalan. PKK veterans trained at the organization's current base in the Qandil mountains of Iraq hold nearly all senior level positions within the YPG. In 2014, with the expansion of ISIS into Kurdish areas of Syria, the YPG was required to enhance its military capabilities. To meet this need, Turkish Kurds from the PKK were transferred to the YPG, taking command of nearly all of its units, and thus demonstrating the YPG's subordinate

<sup>90</sup> Paul K. Davis et al., *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism*, 106-107.

<sup>91</sup> “The PKK’s Branch in Northern Syria PYD-YPG,” SETA, April 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/setavakfi/status/857225668924502016/photo/1>.



position to the PKK within the KCK.<sup>92</sup> “In effect, experienced PKK fighters, whether Syrian or Turkish nationals, provide the skeleton for the YPG.”<sup>93</sup> The PYD’s leader, Salih Muslim, was also stationed in the Qandil mountains with PKK units until 2011, when he returned to Syria upon the outbreak of the civil war.<sup>94</sup> These relational ties make it difficult to argue for the PYD/YPG’s full organizational distinctiveness and autonomy. In terms of command structure, ideology, and resources, the PKK and the PYD are one organization.<sup>95</sup>

While the YPG’s ties to a State Department designated terrorist organization were always clear, this did not deter US Central Command. Faced with the inconvenient truth, CENTCOM officials created the veneer of the multiethnic Syrian Democratic Forces, and played up the group’s proclaimed advocacy of the secular and liberal values inherent to democratic confederalism. As the SDF officially became the “US enabler on the ground” against ISIS in Syria in 2015, it began to receive significant weapons and training, resources that would undoubtedly aid in the group’s expansion in northern Syria.

#### **2.4. The PYD’s Territorial Expansion Amid Syria’s Civil War**

From the early days of Syria’s civil war, beginning in March of 2011, the Kurds of northern Syria gained an advantageous position by attempting to stay clear of confrontation with both the regime and the FSA, in effect establishing what the PYD refers to as ‘the third way’ in Syria.<sup>96</sup> This strategy allowed the Kurdish areas to remain free of the devastation experienced in the operation zones of the FSA and the regime.

---

<sup>92</sup> Gareth H. Jenkins, “The PKK and the PYD: Comrades in Arms, Rivals in Politics?” *The Turkey Analyst*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/535-the-pkk-and-the-pyd-comrades-in-arms-rivals-in-politics?.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Park, *Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey’s Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas*, 455.

<sup>95</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 159.

<sup>96</sup> Seda Altuğ, “The Syrian Uprising and Turkey’s Ordeal with the Kurds,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (March 2013): 128-129. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42635385>.



By the summer of 2012, the ‘third way’ posture would pay off tremendously, as Bashar al-Assad withdrew regime forces from the Kurdish areas of northern Syria to concentrate them against rebel positions in other parts of the country, allowing the PYD to fill the resulting power vacuum. In the absence of state authority, the PYD announced the establishment of three noncontiguous cantons – Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira. The area, collectively known as Rojava, enjoyed de facto autonomy under the control of the PYD.<sup>97</sup> Assad allowed the PYD to operate unchallenged in Rojava, even permitting the continuation of state services to the area.<sup>98</sup> Many analysts speculated that Assad’s withdrawal, in addition to serving as a tactical maneuver against the opposition, was also a retaliation against Turkey. With increasing PYD autonomy on its border, Turkey would be forced to shift its efforts away from toppling Assad, and instead toward countering an empowered PYD.<sup>99</sup>

At the time of the regime’s withdrawal, the PYD was far from the only political party operating in northern Syria. In fact, just after the start of the civil war, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) was established as an umbrella organization encompassing myriad political parties, many of which had ties to Masoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of northern Iraq.<sup>100</sup> As the PKK’s historic rival in transnational Kurdish politics, the KDP enjoyed support from Ankara, which tried to prop up the KNC as a counterweight to the PYD in northern Syria.<sup>101</sup> These efforts failed, however, due to the KNC’s internal divisions and “lack of strong political or armed presence.”<sup>102</sup> The PYD, on the other hand, undoubtedly prospered from its relationship with the PKK, whose provision of arms and fighters allowed its Syrian affiliate to emerge as “the most organized” and “most militarily effective of Syria’s

---

<sup>97</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 29.

<sup>98</sup> Salih, *Turkey, the Kurds, and the Fight Against Islamic State*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Teke, *The Kurds of Northern Syria in Western Media: The BBC and VOA coverage (2014-2018)*, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Altuğ, *The Syrian Uprising and Turkey’s Ordeal with the Kurds*, 124.

<sup>101</sup> Salih, *Turkey, the Kurds, and the Fight Against Islamic State*, 5.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

disparate Kurdish groups.”<sup>103</sup> In fact, the PYD’s armed presence allowed it to act as a tool of repression against its political rivals, reportedly kidnapping and even assassinating members of other Kurdish parties, according to the KNC.<sup>104</sup> These coercive methods undoubtedly contributed to the PYD’s dominance of Syrian Kurdish politics.

Due to these military ties with the PKK, the YPG’s self-defense capabilities were far from negligible when the canton of Kobane came under attack by ISIS in 2014. After the victory in Kobane, recognition of these capabilities motivated the Pentagon to continue what was at first an ad-hoc partnership with the YPG, helping its forces capture the border town of Tel Abyad from ISIS in June of 2015. The fall of Tel Abyad was significant in that it had “served as a key smuggling route for ISIS foreign fighters and supplies to sustain the caliphate.”<sup>105</sup> Also significant was Tel Abyad’s subsequent incorporation into Rojava, allowing the YPG to link up other pockets under its control along the Turkish border.<sup>106</sup> With this development, Erdoğan expressed anxieties about the possible formation an entity that threatened Turkish borders, a concern he had not expressed during the previous two years in which the town was controlled by ISIS.<sup>107</sup>

Four months later, on October 10, 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces were officially established under the direction of US Central Command. However, the United States was not the only global power who lent support to the group. Russia’s 2015 intervention into Syria in support of Assad<sup>108</sup> brought additional benefit to the YPG. In February of 2016, with the assistance of Russian bombing raids, YPG militias

---

<sup>103</sup> Park, *Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey’s Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas*, 455.

<sup>104</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 175.

<sup>105</sup> Stein, “Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward, 8.

<sup>106</sup> “Islamic State Conflict: Syrian Kurds Seize Tal Abyad,” BBC News, June 15, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33132809>.

<sup>107</sup> Park, *Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey’s Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas*, 55.

<sup>108</sup> To be discussed in Chapter 5

captured the strategic Menagh air base near Azaz from Syrian rebels.<sup>109</sup> The seizure of the air base, which was subsequently renamed “Serok Apo” (Leader Apo)<sup>110</sup> after Öcalan, allowed the YPG to expand its foothold along the Turkish border. Russia, which does not consider the PKK a terrorist organization, gave direct support to the YPG in an attempt to cripple the Aleppo-based insurgency against Assad.<sup>111</sup> This assistance gained the YPG the extraordinary position of enjoying simultaneous support from both Washington and Moscow as it extended its territorial control in northern Syria.<sup>112</sup>

When the SDF captured the town of Manbij in late 2016, the YPG’s expansion across the west bank of the Euphrates River violated a clear red line for Turkey. Turkish officials had repeatedly stressed throughout 2015 and 2016 that they would not accept a Kurdish presence west of the Euphrates.<sup>113</sup> Although the US had provided guarantees to Turkey that the YPG would withdraw to the east of the river after the expulsion of ISIS, steps were not taken to fulfill this promise.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the US failed to prevent the subsequent establishment of a military council in Manbij which was dominated by YPG elements.<sup>115</sup> The YPG’s occupation of Manbij would become an ongoing point of contention between the US and Turkey as the group continued to expand its territory at the expense of ISIS.

---

<sup>109</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Kurdish Forces Said to Take Air Base Near Turkish Border,” Reuters, February 11, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/kurdish-forces-said-to-take-air-base-near-turkish-border-idUSKCN0VK0E8>.

<sup>110</sup> “YPG Rename Captured Syrian Air Base After PKK Leader Öcalan,” Rudaw, February 18, 2016, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/180220162>.

<sup>111</sup> Stein, *Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward*, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 31.

<sup>113</sup> Kanat and Hannon, *The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of US-Turkish Relations*, 112.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

January of 2017 brought renewed hope to Turkey for a reversal of US policy in Syria, as the two-term presidency of Barack Obama came to an end. However, hope quickly faded as the incoming president, Donald Trump, retained Obama's retrenchment policies in the Middle East, including the continued partnership with the SDF. Adding to Ankara's disappointment was the Trump administration's retainment of global coalition envoy Brett McGurk and CENTCOM commander Joseph Votel, whose commendations for YPG members had made them controversial figures in Turkey.<sup>116</sup> Tensions between the US and Turkey would soon deepen further as the Trump administration doubled down on its support for the SDF, arming the group with heavy weapons in preparation for an assault on Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the ISIS caliphate. Turkey's disappointment in the Trump administration's Syria policy was particularly acute, as it sharply contrasted Trump's stated intentions during the US presidential campaign of 2016. While his opponent, Hillary Clinton, had openly stated her intent to continue the Obama administration's policy of arming the SDF,<sup>117</sup> Trump had expressed his desire to have "a very successful relationship with Turkey," and indicated his potential to spearhead negotiations aimed at "conflict resolution between Turkey and the Kurdish forces in Syria."<sup>118</sup> Turkey's disappointment was therefore all the more profound when he announced his plans to conduct the Raqqa offensive with the SDF.

As the plan to retake Raqqa unfolded, Ankara made considerable effort to convince the Trump administration to conduct the operation with fighters from the Turkish-backed opposition in place of the SDF. However, according to US officials, a swift liberation of Raqqa in accordance with the Turkish plan would have required as many

---

<sup>116</sup> Kanat and Hannon, *The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of US-Turkish Relations*, 114.

<sup>117</sup> "Turkey Blasts Clinton's Syria Proposal: Isn't America Our Ally?" CBS News, October 11, 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/turkey-hillary-clinton-arming-syria-syrian-kurdish-militia-pkk-terrorists/>.

<sup>118</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş and Kemal Kirişci, "The United States and Turkey: Friends, Enemies, or Only Interests?" Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, April, 2017, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aydintasbas-kirischi\\_united-states-and-turkey.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aydintasbas-kirischi_united-states-and-turkey.pdf).

as 20,000 US troops on the ground.<sup>119</sup> The plan was rejected by Trump, whose Middle East policy followed the same retrenchment line as that of his predecessor. Instead, Trump further strengthened the SDF, providing it the weapons necessary to cope with urban warfare against well-equipped ISIS militants. The weapons deemed necessary for the SDF's capture of Raqqa included heavy machine guns, mortars, anti-tank weapons, armored cars, and engineering equipment.<sup>120</sup> The Trump administration attempted to mollify Turkish concerns over these developments by promising to retrieve excess weapons once ISIS was cleared from Raqqa.<sup>121</sup> However, at this point the US had developed a poor track record of keeping its promises to Turkey vis-à-vis the SDF/YPG, a pattern that would continue after the Raqqa operation was completed.

By the end of 2017 the SDF had achieved the full capture of Raqqa, as well as the eastern city of Deir Ezzor. The fall of Deir Ezzor to the SDF was significant in that it constituted ISIS's last urban stronghold. Equally important, the SDF had now added Syria's oil-rich northeastern region to its holdings.<sup>122</sup> With ISIS nearing defeat in Syria, its vast territorial losses equated to huge gains for the SDF, which extended the entire Turkish-Syrian border east of the Euphrates. In addition to extensive territorial gains, the SDF/YPG's role as the US's surrogate force against ISIS granted it enhanced military capabilities. Under both the Obama and Trump administrations, the YPG had received "substantial stocks of modern weaponry," and US training had allowed it to acquire a new set of capabilities that transformed it into a regular army.<sup>123</sup>

---

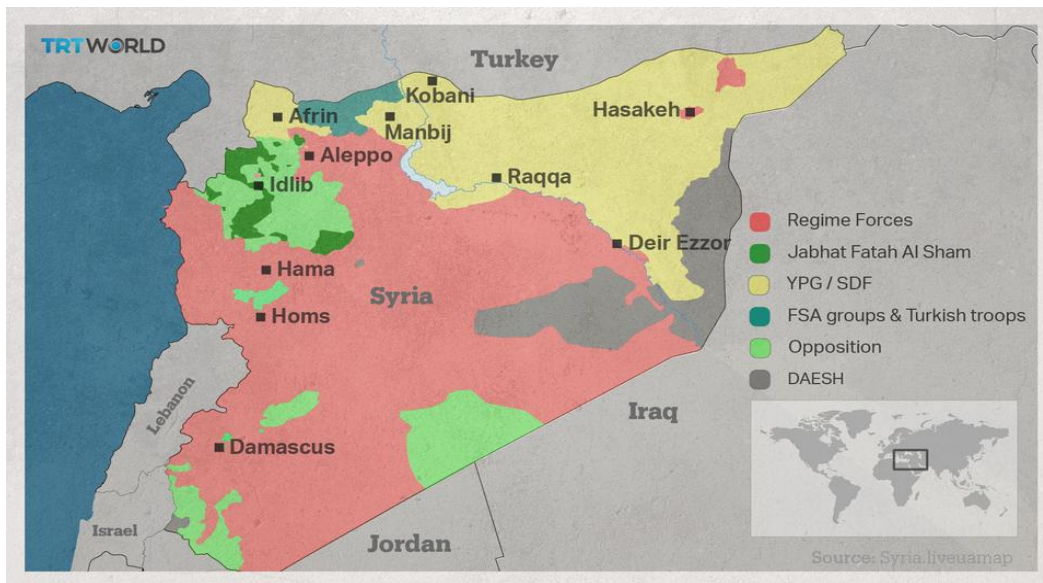
<sup>119</sup> McGurk, *Hard Truths in Syria: America Can't Do More with Less, and it Shouldn't Try*.

<sup>120</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects," New York Times, May 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/us/politics/trump-kurds-syria-army.html>.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Fatima Taşkömür, "Reaching Its Limits in Syria, What is the Next Move for the SDF?" TRT World, November 20, 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/reaching-its-limits-in-syria-what-is-the-next-move-for-the-sdf--12445>.

<sup>123</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 36.



Map 2: Extent of YPG territorial control in November, 2017<sup>124</sup>

The substantial tangible gains – such as land, natural resources, and weapons – that the SDF acquired through its partnership with the US-led coalition, undoubtedly assisted the PYD in consolidating its dominant position in northern Syria. Equally important, however, was the group’s capacity to form opportunistic alliances that would advance its own goals in Syria. While the YPG was in fact fighting ISIS on behalf of the US, in doing so it was also acquiring vast territory upon which to create autonomous zones to implement Öcalan’s confederal model. As Dutch journalist Wladimir van Wilgenburg states, at various times the PYD has had de facto *détentes* with almost all the major players in the Syrian conflict. According to van Wilgenburg, “the main goal of the PYD is to create autonomous areas, so it doesn’t matter to them if they need to cooperate with Al Qaeda, Assad, the FSA, or anyone, as long as it serves their goals. They are not a proxy for anyone.”<sup>125</sup> It can therefore be said that the PYD owes much success to its pragmatism in forming alliances.

<sup>124</sup> TRT World, November 20, 2017, <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/reaching-its-limits-in-syria-what-is-the-next-move-for-the-sdf--12445>.

<sup>125</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 184.

The group has been equally adept at shaping its public image to suit its motives. For example, as the PYD appealed for help from the West in its fight against ISIS, it marketed itself as a defender of secularism, diversity, and ethnic pluralism. In a 2015 statement the group asserted: “We firmly believe that the political system in Rojava, where no distinction is made between ethnicity, gender or creed, is the only viable solution to the crisis in Syria.”<sup>126</sup> Moreover, the attachment of Christian and Arab units to the SDF’s Kurdish core reinforced this image,<sup>127</sup> and won the group support and legitimacy in the eyes of the international public. According to various local and international human rights groups, however, the situation on the ground in SDF-controlled areas has been far from idyllic. Reports of ethnic cleansing and other human rights abuses have been widespread as the SDF/YPG extended into areas not predominantly populated by Kurds, thus revealing the group’s true credentials as “an ethnonationalist political movement.”<sup>128</sup> This stark contrast between the YPG’s media message and its actions on the ground demonstrates the group’s capacity to appeal to disparate populations, drawing from universalist liberal values to gain support from the West, “while trading on Kurdish nationalism within Rojava.”<sup>129</sup>

## **2.5. The Dark Side of the PYD: Human Rights Abuses Revealed**

Although the PKK had formed an alliance of convenience with Hafez al-Assad throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Syrian Kurds had historically suffered repression under the Syrian Ba’athist regime, which came to power in a 1963 *Coup d’état*. The regime soon instituted plans to establish an Arab belt roughly three hundred kilometers long and fifteen kilometers wide along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, displacing Kurds from their homes and resettling Bedouin tribes there in an effort to separate Syrian

---

<sup>126</sup> Paasche and Gunter, *Revisiting Western Strategies Against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*, 16.

<sup>127</sup> Kyle Orton, “In Syria, PKK Mimics Assad’s Propaganda and the West Falls for It,” *The Arab Weekly*, November 24, 2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/syria-pkk-mimics-assads-propaganda-and-west-falls-it>.

<sup>128</sup> Stein, *Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward*, 10.

<sup>129</sup> Orton, *The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria*, 166.

Kurds from their counterparts in Turkey.<sup>130</sup> These actions were subsequent to a 1962 census in which thousands of Kurds were left discounted as Syrian citizens, leaving them instead with identification cards as foreigners.<sup>131</sup> Given the history of Kurdish repression under Arab nationalist policies, many analysts and scholars predicted the inflaming of ethnic tensions as the US declared the YPG its surrogate ground force against ISIS in Syria.

Soon after the Battle of Kobane had reached its end, scholar Aron Lund of the Carnegie Middle East Center warned of the dangers inherent to arming the YPG, stating: “It is at heart an ethnic self-defense militia, not an all-purpose tool for Western intervention in the Syrian civil war ... the YPG’s poor relations with most of the surrounding Arab countryside make it singularly ill-suited to lead an advance deeper into Syria.”<sup>132</sup> Additionally, as scholar Dania Kolehlat Khatib points out, the US was unable to properly contain Kurdish expansion, and “the resentment that had been accumulating for seventy years from prior Arabization policies started surfacing”<sup>133</sup> with the regime’s withdrawal from the northeast. In 2015, Amnesty International began to document serious human rights abuses against Arab and Turkmen inhabitants of SDF-controlled areas.

In a report titled “We Had Nowhere to Go-Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria,” the international human rights organization disclosed allegations of forced displacement, demolition of homes, and the seizure and destruction of property (including the destruction of entire villages in some cases) in 14 towns and villages in Hasakeh and Raqqa governorates.<sup>134</sup> Also found in the report are allegations of YPG

---

<sup>130</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 171.

<sup>131</sup> Kolehlat Khatib and Al-Barasneh, *US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)*, 17.

<sup>132</sup> Lund, *Why the Victory in Kobane Matters*.

<sup>133</sup> Kolehlat Khatib and Al-Barasneh, *US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)*, 22.

<sup>134</sup> “Syria: ‘We Had Nowhere to Go’-Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria, Amnesty International, October 13, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/>.



threats to call in US airstrikes on villagers if they refused to leave their homes.<sup>135</sup> The abuses were allegedly carried out in retaliation for the victims' perceived support of ISIS, although they insisted that they had no involvement with any armed groups. In response to the allegations, the director of the Asayish (the PYD's security force) claimed that such cases were "limited" and "isolated incidents."<sup>136</sup> However, Amnesty International has not been the only international organization to accuse the PYD/YPG of human rights abuses.

As early as June of 2014, Human Rights Watch also noted significant violations by the PYD, including unfair court proceedings, disproportionate prison sentences, and the enlistment of child soldiers.<sup>137</sup> Charges of child recruitment were echoed in a United Nations report, which stated that "children as young as ten years of age were associated with the People's Protection Units."<sup>138</sup> Adding to the list of alleged abuses are reports by reputable journalists of the YPG's use of forced conscription,<sup>139</sup> as well as extortion of Kurdish residents living in Afrin.<sup>140</sup> According to these residents, "on paper there is coalition rule [between the PYD and the KNC], but in reality the PKK [PYD] are the ones with the weapons to force the people."<sup>141</sup> The overall extent of the human rights violations committed by the PYD is perhaps best summarized by professor Raymond Hinnebusch:

As far as the Kurdish experiment in the northeast, although touted as a new model of pluralistic multi-ethnic mass participation, with ethnic quotas in

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 16,19.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>137</sup> "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria," Human Rights Watch, June 19, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>.

<sup>138</sup> "Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary General," United Nations Security Council, October 30, 2018, <http://undocs.org/s/2018/969>.

<sup>139</sup> Roy Gutman, "In Syria, U.S.-Backed Kurdish Fighters Face Trump's Withdrawal – and the Legacy of Their Own Mistakes", The Intercept, December 28, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/12/28/syria-withdrawal-kurds-pkk/>.

<sup>140</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 187.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

various representative assemblies, its government is best seen as ‘ethnic Leninism’: the more inclusive mass organizations and councils were controlled by a ruling party, the PYD, under the tutelage of PKK cadres; repression of dissent, arrests of members of rival Kurdish parties, forced conscription – reproduced regime techniques. Instances of ethnic cleansing suggest this project may aim to maximize Kurdish ethnic purity in what had been mixed Arab-Kurdish areas.<sup>142</sup>

Concurrent to the extensive abuses occurring within Rojava is the PYD’s imperative to tightly control media freedoms. In November of 2013, Reporters Without Borders issued a report in which it catalogued abuses committed by the YPG and Asayish against Syrian news providers, including abductions, beatings, and arrests of journalist seen as “too critical”<sup>143</sup> of the PYD. Western journalists and analysts have also been subjected to repressive measures, including being “closely shadowed” by PYD minders, and in some cases expelled from Rojava for critical reporting.<sup>144</sup> Complicit in these abuses has been the US Department of Defense, whose communications department has romanticized the YPG in its rebranded form as the SDF, and turned a blind eye to its extensively documented human rights violations.

In 2018, when questioned by veteran journalist Roy Gutman about the YPG’s use of forced conscription, US Central Command spokesman Bill Urban replied that “the US is partnered with the vetted multiethnic Syrian Democratic Forces in northern Syria,” but “not partnered with the YPG or PKK”.<sup>145</sup> The manufactured claims of organizational distinctiveness and denial of human rights abuses have allowed the US Department of Defense to conveniently utilize the YPG’s military capabilities while sweeping under the rug the subconflicts that support for the group has engendered.

---

<sup>142</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, “From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA: The Case of Syria”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 407.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455330>.

<sup>143</sup> “How Kurdistan’s PYD Keeps the Media and News Providers in Line,” Reporters Without Borders, May 1, 2014, <https://rsf.org/en/news/how-kurdistan-pyd-keeps-media-and-news-providers-line>.

<sup>144</sup> Orton, *In Syria, PKK Mimics Assad’s Propaganda and the West Falls for It*.

<sup>145</sup> Gutman, *In Syria, U.S.-Backed Kurdish Fighters Face Trump’s Withdrawal – and the Legacy of Their Own Mistakes*.

For the US, the YPG was a means to an end, a tool by which to defeat ISIS in Syria with minimal US casualties and resources. As this policy met its objectives, the proper management of its unintended consequences took a backseat.<sup>146</sup>

Yet, while it may have been advantageous for US officials to turn a blind eye to the disturbing developments which came with the PYD's rise to dominance in northern Syria, this was certainly not the case for Turkey. With ISIS nearing its defeat, "Turkish policy makers had to face the fact that their main strategic ally in NATO was now allied with an organization close to the PKK, which in turn controlled territory along most of its southern border."<sup>147</sup> What's more, in the face of Turkey's objections the US had made security guarantees that it couldn't keep, including its promise to recover weapons given to the YPG and to restrict its presence to the east side of the Euphrates River.<sup>148</sup> In the face of these developments, Turkish-American relations reached a nadir, and continued US support to the PYD compelled Turkey to militarily intervene into northern Syria in direct defiance of US policy.

---

<sup>146</sup> Kolehlat Khatib and Al-Barasneh, *US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)*, 26.

<sup>147</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 29.

<sup>148</sup> Luke Coffey, "Start Small and Think Big to Rebuild the US-Turkey Relationship," *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 2 (2020): 12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26918119>.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONFLICT IN SYRIA AND THE DECLINE OF TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS**

After the US commitment to its partnership with the SDF became clear in 2015, the US and Turkey found themselves increasingly at odds in Syria. Attempting to ease concerns, the US repeatedly assured Turkey that its partnership with the SDF was only temporary and transactional.<sup>149</sup> However, events on the ground were less than convincing. The realization of a well-trained and heavily armed PKK affiliate along its southern border raised justified concerns on the part of the Turkish state and society over the potential for attacks originating from northern Syria, or the transfer of weapons to PKK militants inside Turkey. Most importantly, however, the SDF/YPG threat represented more than a present danger, it also triggered historical traumas that are deeply rooted in Turkish society. To better understand Turkey's increased threat perception and growing mistrust in response to the US-YPG partnership, an examination of these historical traumas is essential.

#### **3.1. Sèvres Syndrome, Turkish Nationalism, and Rising Anti-Americanism**

The extent to which the prospect of Kurdish autonomy triggers anxiety and suspicion in the minds of the Turkish state and society can be traced to the devastating defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, and its subsequent dissolution and dismemberment by foreign powers. The Sèvres Treaty of 1920, which envisioned the creation of an autonomous Kurdish entity as part of an overall agreement to partition Turkey among the victorious foreign powers, threatened the survival of the state and

---

<sup>149</sup> Kanat and Hannon, *The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations*, 112.

its people.<sup>150</sup> By failing to recognize Turkish independence or homeland, the Sèvres Treaty exacerbated feelings of trauma due to territorial loss and foreign occupation.<sup>151</sup> Although the treaty was rendered void by the Turkish War of Independence, and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the fear of being partitioned – especially through foreign powers’ support of minorities – has survived to shape the threat perceptions of following generations, and become “a chosen trauma” with which Turks identify at “the societal and individual levels.”<sup>152</sup>

This fear of being partitioned, referred to as Sèvres Syndrome, is defined by a constant concern for the Republic’s territorial integrity, and the suspicion that foreign (especially Western) powers are conspiring to weaken and divide Turkey. Therefore, the defense of the Turkish state and its territorial integrity from external forces has been a traditional imperative of Turkey’s foreign and security policy since the founding of the Republic.<sup>153</sup> In addition to the collective trauma associated with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, a defining feature of the newly established republic was a national identity based solely on the concept of Turkishness.<sup>154</sup> Turkey’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, “replaced the more culturally tolerant, multiethnic, and multireligious aspects of the Ottoman Empire”<sup>155</sup> by establishing one national identity based on ethnic and national ties to the Central Asian tribes who founded the Ottoman dynasty in the fourteenth century.<sup>156</sup> On the basis of these founding ideologies, the declaration of Kurdish identity or autonomy was considered anathema.

---

<sup>150</sup> Şebnem Udum, “Issues in Turkish-US Relations: A Politico-Psychological Analysis Through Problematic Cases,” in *Historical Examinations and Current Issues in Turkish-American Relations*, eds. Hüseyin Işıksal and Ozan Örmeci (Bern: Peter Lang, 2020), 223.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>154</sup> Kamal A. Beyoghlou, “Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership,” Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2020, 15. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep24340>.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

The Turkish government, from the beginning of the nation's inception, has “objected categorically to the emergence of a Kurdish entity in the region, especially inside Turkey’s southeastern provinces.”<sup>157</sup>



Map 3: The Treaty of Sèvres (August 10, 1920)<sup>158</sup>

Stemming from Turkey’s historical context, and its nearly forty-year struggle against the PKK, sensitivity over Kurdish separatist aspirations has remained a constant feature of Turkish security culture. The fear of a loss of territorial integrity, bitterness at the PKK’s long history of violence, and an elemental Turkish nationalism are all hard-wired into Turkish politics and society.”<sup>159</sup> In recent decades, anxieties regarding Turkey’s Kurdish question have been compounded by American foreign policy decisions in the region. In both of its military interventions in Iraq, first in 1991 and again in 2003, US operations against Saddam Hussein resulted in the empowerment of Iraqi Kurds, leading to Turkish suspicions that the US favored the formation of an independent Kurdistan in the region.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>158</sup> “Map of the Treaty of Sèvres on the Day of its Signing (August 10, 1929),” Wikimedia Commons, May 20, 2019, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Treaty\\_of\\_S%C3%A8vres\\_1920.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Treaty_of_S%C3%A8vres_1920.svg).

<sup>159</sup> Park, *Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey’s Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas*, 442.

At the closing stage of the First Gulf War in 1991, Iraqi Kurds, incited by US president George H.W. Bush, rose up against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Saddam's brutal counterattack led to a humanitarian crisis in which "more than a million refugees fled over mountains into Turkey and Iran."<sup>160</sup> Attempting to avert catastrophe, Turkey, the US, Britain and France created a safe haven and no fly zone in northern Iraq to which refugees could safely return. Gradually, the formation of this safe zone led to the development of a de facto Kurdish political entity in which PKK militants also found safe haven, utilizing the territory to intensify its operations against Turkey.<sup>161</sup> These events clearly manifested Turkey's vulnerability to the spillover effects of US policy in the region, especially in relation to the Kurdish question.

With the initiation of the post-9/11 War on Terror, US policy in the Middle East would continue to significantly impact Turkey's domestic politics and security. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein from power again resulted in political gains for Iraqi Kurds. Adopted under US occupation, Iraq's 2005 constitution incorporated a federalist government structure which allowed the Kurds to establish the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>162</sup> Kurdish desires for full independence were no secret, and attaining self-rule in the form of the KRG was a means by which to "prepare the groundwork" for statehood.<sup>163</sup> In 2017, against strong opposition from regional and international actors, the KRG held a referendum in which ninety three percent of voters favored independence.<sup>164</sup> Although the KRG's succession was ultimately halted by the deployment of central government forces to the region, a precedent was set in regard to Kurdish autonomy. If Syria's Kurds – with

---

<sup>160</sup> Michael Rubin, *Kurdistan Rising? Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region*, 28.

<sup>161</sup> Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "Friends No More? The Rise of Anti-American Nationalism in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 53. <https://doi.org/10.3751/64.1.13>.

<sup>162</sup> Aliza Marcus, "Turkey's PKK: Rise, Fall, and Rise Again?" *World Policy Journal* 24, no. 1 (2007): 75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40210079>.

<sup>163</sup> Michael Rubin, *Kurdistan Rising? Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region*, 36.

<sup>164</sup> "Iraqi Kurds Decisively Back Independence in Referendum," BBC News, September 27, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41419633>.

the help of US policy makers – extract recognized legal autonomy alongside the KRG in Iraq, the demonstration effect could generate similar demands for autonomy or independence among Turkey’s own Kurdish population,<sup>165</sup> putting Turkish territorial integrity at risk. For this reason, the events unfolding in the Syrian conflict cannot be divorced from Turkey’s own domestic politics.

As Kurdish autonomy and empowerment in Iraq and Syria have come as a result of US intervention, these developments have fueled the narrative of fear inherent to Sèvres Syndrome, provoking suspicions of a US secret agenda to create an independent Kurdistan that would partition Turkey.<sup>166</sup> The American prioritization of the YPG in its anti-ISIS campaign, and the circulation of photographs in the Turkish media featuring US Special Forces wearing YPG insignia, reinforced this narrative.<sup>167</sup> Widespread belief emerged among the Turkish public that the US supported Kurdish separatist aspirations, and that ISIS was “a pretext for the US to supply arms to the YPG.”<sup>168</sup> By 2018, polls revealed that most of the Turkish public “perceived the US as the number one foreign country threatening Turkey.”<sup>169</sup> This anti-American sentiment, which was already pervasive in Turkish society, has appeared to increase as the US partnership with the YPG persists, adversely affecting the resilience of Turkish-American relations.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Arab Uprisings and MENA Regional States System,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 11, no. 42 (2014): 24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43925849>.

<sup>166</sup> Kanat and Üstün, *U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria*, 96.

<sup>167</sup> İnan Rüma and Mitat Çelikpala, “Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 16, no. 62 (2019): 80. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26664886>.

<sup>168</sup> Serdar Ş. Güner and Dilan E. Koç, “Leverages and Constraints for Turkish Foreign Policy in Syrian War: A Structural Balance Approach,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 15, no. 59 (2018): 94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26605021>.

<sup>169</sup> Ertem and Karadeniz, *Lost in Translation: A System Level Analysis of the Turkish-U.S. Alliance Under the Obama and Trump Administrations*, 22.

<sup>170</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 4.



In response, US officials have often imparted their full understanding of Turkey's security concerns vis-à-vis the PYD/YPG, insisting that their partnership with the group was a necessity in the fight against ISIS, and that no political promises were made in regard to future support for Kurdish autonomy or statehood in the region.<sup>171</sup> The US further justified its actions by citing its open communication with Turkey throughout its cooperation with the YPG, and insisting that no evidence was found of US-supplied weapons making their way into Turkey.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, at the start of the anti-ISIS campaign, the US made reciprocal complaints regarding Turkey's credibility as an ally, lamenting its decision to prohibit the use of Turkish air bases, and harboring suspicions that Turkey was providing assistance to ISIS and other jihadist groups in the dual pursuit of toppling Assad and preventing Kurdish autonomy.<sup>173</sup> These shared negative perceptions between the US and Turkey created a widening trust deficit among their respective policy makers and publics, causing the Turkish-American relationship to devolve into constant accusations of the other's failure to provide support against terrorism. By mid-2015, however, Turkish policy on ISIS would undergo a substantial shift in the aftermath of the Islamic State's first major attack on Turkish soil.

### **3.2. The Suruç Bombing: Shifting Threat Perceptions and Policy Objectives**

Although Turkey had experienced small-scale ISIS attacks as early as 2014, the first major attack on Turkish soil was carried out on July 20, 2015. In the town of Suruç, just across the border from Syria's Kobane, an ISIS suicide bomb killed thirty-three people and wounded over one hundred at a gathering of the Federation of Socialist

---

<sup>171</sup> "US Did Not Make Any Political Promises to the YPG Says Ex-Envoy to Syria," Middle East Monitor, April 6, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210406-us-did-not-make-any-political-promises-to-the-ypg-says-ex-envoy-to-syria/>.

<sup>172</sup> McGurk, *Hard Truths in Syria: America Can't Do More with Less, and it Shouldn't Try*.

<sup>173</sup> Lenore G. Martin, "Analysing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2019.1605571>.

Youth Associations (SGDF).<sup>174</sup> The young activists had planned to cross the border into Kobane to aid in the reconstruction of the town after the battle against ISIS had left it largely devastated. The attack in Suruç, “one of the deadliest” on Turkish soil,<sup>175</sup> increased Turkey’s threat perception regarding ISIS, and served as a catalyst for the opening of Turkish air bases to the anti-ISIS coalition. Yet, while the Suruç attack aligned the US and Turkey more closely in regard to ISIS counterterrorism, it also launched a series of events that significantly changed the course of Turkey’s domestic Kurdish conflict.

At the time of the bombing, the Turkish state had been observing a two-year ceasefire with the PKK in efforts to reach a resolution to the long-standing Kurdish issue. However, in the days following the Suruç attack, accusations circulated that the AKP government had backed the Islamic State against Syria’s Kurds,<sup>176</sup> and had neglected to take sufficient measures to prevent the attack although it had received prior intelligence.<sup>177</sup> PKK retaliation soon followed with the murders of two Turkish police officers accused by the militants of cooperating with ISIS.<sup>178</sup> Amid the new spiral of violence the ceasefire effectively collapsed, provoking the Turkish state to return to harsh counterterrorism measures, including the storming of urban centers in the country’s southeast to prevent PKK entrenchment.<sup>179</sup> The return to “all-out-war”<sup>180</sup> between the Turkish government and the PKK occurred at a critical juncture in the

---

<sup>174</sup> Kanat and Üstün, *U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria*, 89.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Mehmet Emin Çalışkan, “Turkey Denies Turning Blind Eye to Islamic State as Bombing Stokes Anger,” Reuters, July 21, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-suruc/turkey-denies-turning-blind-eye-to-islamic-state-as-bombing-stokes-anger-idUSKCN0PV16M20150721>.

<sup>177</sup> “Turkey Commemorates Victims of Suruç Bombing on Fifth Anniversary,” Duvar English, July 20, 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/human-rights/2020/07/20/turkey-commemorates-victims-of-suruc-bombing-on-fifth-anniversary>.

<sup>178</sup> “Kurdish Group Claims ‘Revenge Murder’ on Turkish Police,” Al Jazeera, July 22, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/7/22/kurdish-group-claims-revenge-murder-on-turkish-police>.

<sup>179</sup> Rüma and Çelikpala, *Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater*, 76.

<sup>180</sup> Martin, *Analysing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East*, 275.

coalition's fight against ISIS, just as the US was consolidating its partnership with the PYD. Turkey's domestic developments and policy shifts in the aftermath of the Suruç attack would therefore bring both opportunities and challenges for the global coalition's anti-ISIS operations, and for Turkish-American bilateral relations alike.

Turkey's policy changes in response to the Suruç attack led to greater emphasis on combatting ISIS, including taking steps to increase border controls and prevent the recruitment of Turkish citizens to the organization.<sup>181</sup> These developments – along with Ankara's announcement that it would take part in the coalition's military operations and allow the use of Turkish air bases to target ISIS – were all welcome news in Washington. However, while Turkey's increased efforts to combat ISIS were undoubtedly beneficial to the global coalition, this did not mean that Ankara had made the defeat of ISIS its top priority in Syria. The concurrent resumption of PKK insurgency had raised the stakes even higher for Turkey's national security, making the prevention of the PYD's expansion in Syria the key driver of Turkish foreign policy.<sup>182</sup> Although the Obama administration publicly conveyed its support to Turkey in its fight against PKK terrorism, US officials feared that Ankara's renewed conflict with the group would disrupt American support for the YPG, ultimately rendering anti-ISIS operations in Syria more complicated and less effective.<sup>183</sup>

By August of 2016, in the face of the YPG's capture of Manbij and expansion across the west bank of the Euphrates, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield, its first cross-border ground offensive into Syria. In support of the anti-ISIS coalition, Turkey successfully cleared ISIS militants away from the Syrian border, setting up a safe zone to which “more than 60,000 refugees could return to their homeland.”<sup>184</sup> Although the

---

<sup>181</sup> Kanat and Üstün, *U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria*, 89.

<sup>182</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 15-16.

<sup>183</sup> Kanat and Üstün, *U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria*, 90-91.

<sup>184</sup> Merve Seren, “Euphrates Shield Revisited,” Anadolu Agency, August 26, 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/euphrates-shield-revisited/894249>.

operation directly targeted ISIS, it also aimed to halt the YPG's westward expansion, preventing the joining of its Kobane and Jazira cantons with Afrin.<sup>185</sup> Thus, while Euphrates Shield fulfilled commitments to the anti-ISIS coalition, it also revealed the level of threat with which Turkey viewed the YPG's expansion, as well as Ankara's willingness to intervene militarily to protect its national security.

Subsequent to the launch of Euphrates shield, tensions over US support for the YPG began to rise, as Turkey regularly bombed YPG positions in Syria, claiming that its intent was to prevent arms supplies from reaching PKK militants in Turkey.<sup>186</sup> The situation became increasingly volatile as the US began to integrate special forces into YPG combat units,<sup>187</sup> raising the risk of direct military engagement between US and Turkish forces. Yet, as tensions rose, the US refused to relinquish its partnership with the YPG despite Turkey's objections and clear willingness to take military action. As US President Donald Trump took office in January of 2017, dialogue over the YPG would become even more strained, as Trump's haphazard conduct of foreign policy added a new level of perplexity to the already delicate state of Turkish-American relations.

### **3.3. Turkish-American Relations Under Trump: The Crisis Over Syria**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Turkey's hopes for a reset of Turkish-American relations under newly elected president Trump were dashed in the initial months of his administration. Although Trump differed significantly from Obama in his style of communication and conduct, the two shared the same Middle East retrenchment strategy. Like Obama, Trump made the defeat of ISIS the top American priority in Syria, retaining the US partnership with the YPG/SDF and even arming the group more

---

<sup>185</sup> Sofuoğlu, *Who Are the Kurds?*

<sup>186</sup> Philipp Biermann, "The Kurds as Allies of the West in Syria and Iraq: Effective Partnership or Political Powder Keg?" Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2017, 3. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep22179>.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

heavily in preparation to expel ISIS from Raqqa. In much the same way as Obama, Trump's administration seemed to underestimate the extent to which continued support for the SDF would negatively impact relations with Turkey.<sup>188</sup>

Following the capture of Raqqa in October of 2017, the US began to consider the prospect of converting the SDF from an offensive force into a defensive border protection entity to guard against ISIS resurgence and infiltration into SDF-liberated enclaves.<sup>189</sup> The planned deployment of the 30,000 strong SDF-led force along the Turkish border elicited condemnation from Turkey,<sup>190</sup> who viewed the proposal as the establishment of an adjacent "terror corridor."<sup>191</sup> The US intent to carry out the plan provoked Turkey's second military intervention into Syria in January of 2018. Codenamed "Operation Olive Branch," the offensive dislodged the SDF from the northwestern district of Afrin, drawing statements of concern from US officials.<sup>192</sup> Tensions soon reached unprecedented heights as Turkey threatened to extend the operation to Manbij, a move which portended a direct military confrontation between Turkish forces and US troops stationed there with the SDF. The delicate situation in Manbij generated urgently needed rounds of diplomacy to avert the unfolding crisis in Turkish-American relations.

By June of 2018 a tentative agreement was reached on a roadmap to withdraw SDF forces from Manbij, establish a local administration acceptable to the town's residents,

---

<sup>188</sup> Coffey, *Start Small and Think Big to Rebuild the US-Turkey Relationship*, 12.

<sup>189</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 59.

<sup>190</sup> "Russia, Turkey Condemn US Plans for Syria Border Force," VOA, January 15, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-turkey-condemn-us-plans-for-syria-border-force/4208301.html>.

<sup>191</sup> Emin Avundukluoğlu, "US Risks Relations with Turkey Over Border Force Plan," Anadolu Agency, January 17, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/-us-risks-relations-with-turkey-over-border-force-plan-/1033080>.

<sup>192</sup> Safvan Allahverdi, "US Concerned About Situation in Afrin: State Dept," Anadolu Agency, January 21, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-concerned-about-situation-in-afrin-state-dept/1038036>.

and commence joint US-Turkish patrols west of the Euphrates.<sup>193</sup> Although details regarding how and when the elements of the agreement would be implemented were vague, the Manbij Roadmap offered “a sense of cautious optimism”<sup>194</sup> for Turkish-American realignment in Syria and an overall improvement of their bilateral relations. However, as with other promises issued to Turkey in regard to the SDF/YPG, the US appeared to drag its feet on effectuating the planned roadmap.

The agreement had yet to be implemented when in December of 2018, after a phone conversation with Erdoğan, President Trump declared the defeat of ISIS and the complete and immediate withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops from Syria.<sup>195</sup> The sudden and unforeseen decision – announced via Twitter – was soon retracted on the insistence of Trump’s security advisers, who convinced him to retain a ‘residual force’ in Syria to deter an ISIS resurgence.<sup>196</sup> The sudden declaration and subsequent backtracking on troop withdrawals exemplified the mercurial nature of Trump’s foreign policy conduct, which added an additional obstacle to Turkish-American convergence on Syria.

By 2019, the officially declared defeat of ISIS had done little to change American involvement with the YPG. Persistent guarantees that the US partnership with the group was tactical and temporary had become even less convincing in the aftermath of ISIS’s supposed defeat, as the YPG retained its US-supplied weapons and support, and continued its presence west of the Euphrates River. The enduring US-YPG partnership, initially cited as a necessity for defeating ISIS, was now deemed necessary for preventing an ISIS resurgence. Of further concern for Ankara was the burden of

---

<sup>193</sup> “US Ending Engagement with YPG ‘Fundamental Necessity’ for Manbij Roadmap,” Daily Sabah, November 3 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/11/03/us-ending-engagement-with-ypg-fundamental-necessity-for-manbij-roadmap-turkish-deputy-fm>.

<sup>194</sup> Kanat and Hannon, *The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations*, 120.

<sup>195</sup> Karademir, *A Dance of Entanglement: The US-Turkish Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict*, 43.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

hosting some 3.6 million refugees<sup>197</sup> who had fled to Turkey since the start of Syria's civil war, a policy for which the AKP government had begun to draw significant domestic criticism.<sup>198</sup> Under these regional and domestic pressures, Ankara threatened a third military offensive into Syria.

Against the backdrop of Ankara's threats, US and Turkish officials reached an agreement to create a joint operations center in southern Turkey from which to manage the establishment of a safe zone in northern Syria. For Turkey, the objectives of the safe zone were twofold. First, the zone would help to alleviate the refugee burden by allowing a considerable number of displaced Syrians to return to their country.<sup>199</sup> Secondly, it would facilitate the removal of the YPG from the area and the elimination of their tunnels and fortifications, thereby easing Turkey's security concerns.<sup>200</sup> However, the plan soon broke down amid disagreements over who would control the zone, as well as its proposed depth inside Syria. Frustrated by the US failure to implement the Manbij Roadmap, and faced with yet another stalled agreement, Turkey launched its third military operation into Syria on October 9, 2019.

Operation Peace Spring, Turkey's third military incursion into Syria in as many years, was by far its most controversial, drawing condemnation from the international community, as well as US officials across the political spectrum. Much of the controversy surrounding the operation stemmed from the unpredictable conduct of President Trump, who in a highly contested move, announced to Erdoğan in a phone

---

<sup>197</sup> "Turkey Fact Sheet," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, October 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR-Turkey-One-Pager-Fact-Sheet-Oct2019.pdf>.

<sup>198</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the US, Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 34.

<sup>199</sup> Carlotta Gall, "U.S. and Turkey Avoid Conflict by Agreeing on Buffer Zone in Syria," New York Times, August 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/world/middleeast/us-turkey-peace-corridor-syria.html>.

<sup>200</sup> Tessa Fox, "Turkey Agrees to Set Up Operation Center for Syria Safe Zone," Al Jazeera, August 7, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/7/turkey-us-agree-to-set-up-operation-centre-for-syria-safe-zone>.

conversation on October 6 that he was withdrawing US forces from the SDF zone.<sup>201</sup> Although Trump's withdrawal sent a clear green light to Ankara to proceed with its operation against the US's Kurdish allies, he subsequently threatened – via Twitter and a personal letter to Erdoğan – to destroy the Turkish economy if Turkey did anything Trump considered “off limits.”<sup>202</sup>

Defying Trump's warnings, Turkey proceeded to launch Operation Peace Spring east of the Euphrates River. According to Turkish state media, the operation's objectives were the securing of Turkey's border with Syria, the creation of a 30-km-wide safe zone cleared of ISIS and YPG elements, the resettlement of two million Syrian refugees, and the protection of Syria's territorial integrity.<sup>203</sup> In Turkey's view Operation Peace Spring, along with its two other military interventions, were in line with the country's right to self-defense based on UN Security Council Resolutions (no. 1624, 2170, and 2178), as well as Article 51 of the UN charter.<sup>204</sup> However, the operation elicited widespread outrage from the international community, as critics claimed the offensive went beyond self-defense, and spawned further instability in Syria.

Of primary concern was the disruption to anti-ISIS coalition efforts to prevent an ISIS resurgence. At the time of the operation, the SDF was holding thousands of hardened ISIS prisoners and their families in camps situated within the SDF's territories. “They included a reported 12,000 ISIS fighters, plus family members put at 60,000-74,000 in

---

<sup>201</sup> Ioannis Grigoriadis and Ümit Erol Aras, “US-Turkey Relations Hanging By a Thread: Trump's Re-election,” Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, October 2020, 4. <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Policy-brief-138-Grigoriadis-Aras.pdf>.

<sup>202</sup> Gülmez, *The Resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Different Threat Perceptions and Worldviews*, 483.

<sup>203</sup> “Operation Peace Spring Starts in N. Syria: Erdoğan,” Anadolu Agency, October 9, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/operation-peace-spring/operation-peace-spring-starts-in-n-syria-erdogan/1607147>.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.



number”<sup>205</sup> guarded by the SDF. According to US media sources, hundreds of prisoners escaped the camps as the SDF turned its attention from guarding ISIS captives to defending against the Turkish assault.<sup>206</sup> Such reports provoked fears that the newly escaped prisoners could provide the foundation for an ISIS revival. In addition to allegations of facilitating the escape of ISIS prisoners, Turkey also faced accusations of ethnic engineering in northern Syria due to its intent to resettle two million mainly Arab refugees in the areas cleared of YPG militias.<sup>207</sup> In the months immediately following the operation, media outlets reported cases of Turkey facilitating the return of Syrian Arabs to areas under Turkish control, including Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, which “have always had a substantial Kurdish population.”<sup>208</sup> The flood of criticisms regarding Operation Peace Spring and its aftermath further damaged Turkey’s reputation in the eyes of US officials and the public alike.

Perhaps most damaging to Turkey’s image was the grim conduct and character of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which Turkey had employed as a proxy force in all three of its military operations in northern Syria. Formerly known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the group initially consisted mainly of defectors of the Syrian army who sought to overthrow the Assad regime. As the war in Syria progressed, the SNA became a loose collective of militias which included Islamist groups operating under its umbrella.<sup>209</sup> Employed by the AKP government as a supporting force alongside the Turkish military in the fight against the YPG, the SNA developed a reputation for

---

<sup>205</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the US, Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 34.

<sup>206</sup> Natasha Turak, “Hundreds of ISIS Prisoners Are Escaping From Camps in Northern Syria Amid Turkish Offensive,” CNBC, October 14, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/14/isis-prisoners-are-escaping-from-camps-in-syria-amid-turkish-offensive.html>.

<sup>207</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the US, Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 34.

<sup>208</sup> Tessa Fox, “Who Exactly Is Turkey Resettling in Syria?” *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/19/who-exactly-is-turkey-resettling-in-syria/>.

<sup>209</sup> Biermann, *The Kurds as Allies of the West in Syria and Iraq: Effective Partnership or Political Powder Keg?*, 3.

lawlessness and civilian abuses.<sup>210</sup> Following Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in Afrin in 2018, Human Rights Watch documented the looting, destruction, and seizure of Kurdish civilian property by the SNA without compensation to the owners.<sup>211</sup> While these post-Olive Branch abuses failed to receive widespread attention, the SNA's conduct during Operation Peace Spring gained them rapid international notoriety.<sup>212</sup>

As the SNA carried out the operation's ground offensive, videos surfaced of its fighters chanting extremist slogans, carrying out field executions, and "practicing targeted violence against women and minorities."<sup>213</sup> An Amnesty International report issued during the operation summarized the events as evidence of war crimes, stating that SNA fighters had displayed a flagrant disregard for civilian life, carrying out summary executions and unlawful attacks in residential areas that have killed and injured civilians.<sup>214</sup> Most shocking among the SNA crimes was the assassination of Kurdish female political leader Hevrin Khalaf, whose brutal and inhumane execution at the hands of the SNA's Ahrar Al-Sharqiya faction sparked international outrage.<sup>215</sup> In US political and public circles, an outcry over the SNA's crimes was leveled at Turkey, whose reputation for supporting extremist groups against the YPG now appeared fully evident, fueling increased anti-Turkish sentiment.

However, criticism surrounding Operation Peace Spring was not reserved for Turkey alone. The Trump administration's haphazard conduct of foreign policy provoked

---

<sup>210</sup> Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Who Are Turkey's Proxy Fighters in Syria?" *The New York Review*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>.

<sup>211</sup> "Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property," Human Rights Watch, June 14, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/14/syria-turkey-backed-groups-seizing-property#>.

<sup>212</sup> Tsurkov, *Who Are Turkey's Proxy Fighters in Syria?*

<sup>213</sup> Dastan Jasim, "Biden's Challenge: Kurdish Autonomy and Turkish Expansionism," *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*, 2021, 3-4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28521>.

<sup>214</sup> "Syria: Damning Evidence of War Crimes and Other Violations by Turkish Forces and Their Allies," Amnesty International, October 18, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/>.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

shock and anger from both domestic and international publics alike, and Trump was loudly faulted for displaying “a complete lack of understanding of anything happening on the ground” in Syria.<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, in their response to Operation Peace Spring, many US officials demonstrated astounding levels of hypocrisy, condemning Turkey for its unilateral intervention while neglecting to assume accountability for the US failure to implement agreements that were designed to avert such an intervention<sup>217</sup> (i.e. the Manbij Roadmap and jointly controlled safe zone). Moreover, although US officials had often claimed to understand Turkey’s legitimate security concerns vis-à-vis the YPG, this did not prevent the US Treasury from announcing sanctions on two Turkish ministries and three senior government officials<sup>218</sup> in response to Turkey’s efforts to secure its border by way of military intervention. Yet, amid the Trump administration’s mixed messages and unpredictable policies, one thing stood clear. Turkish-American relations had sunk to new lows, producing the biggest crisis since clashes over Cyprus in the mid-1970s.<sup>219</sup>

While the US proved to be less than reliable to its nearly seventy-year NATO ally Turkey, its treatment of its SDF partners on the ground in Syria was no better. The YPG-led forces who had absorbed thousands of casualties<sup>220</sup> while allowing US troops to stay largely out of harm’s way in the fight against ISIS, were subsequently abandoned by the Trump administration in the face of the Turkish assault. Adding insult, Trump and his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, publicly downplayed the importance of the SDF in the fight against ISIS, stating that the Kurds were “no

---

<sup>216</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the US, Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 34.

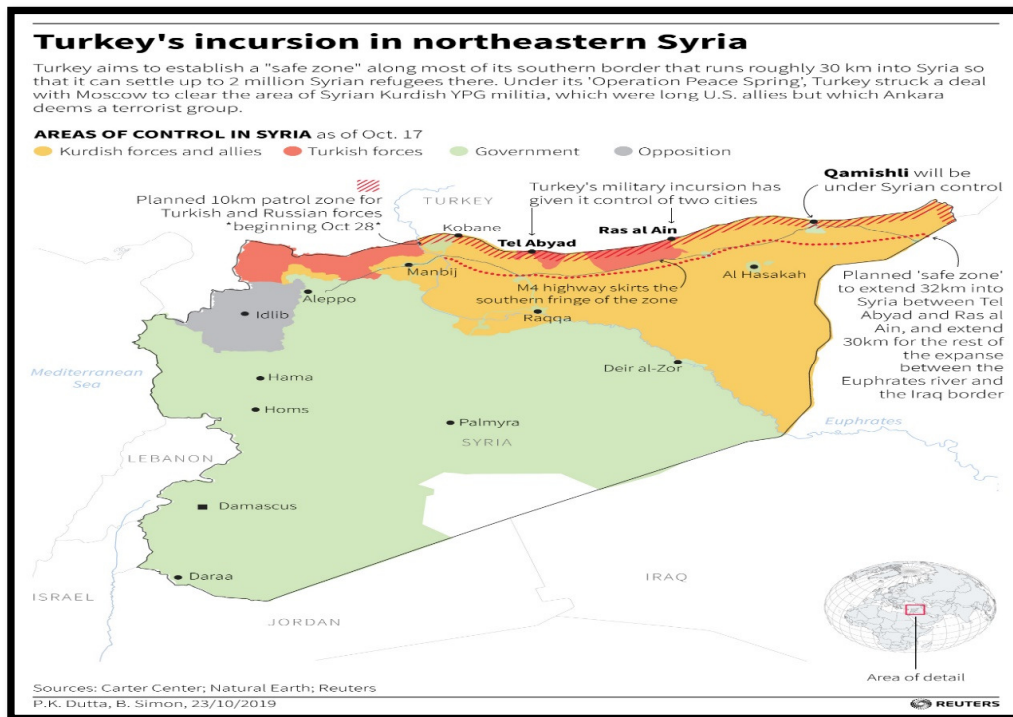
<sup>217</sup> “US Arming YPG ‘Created a Nightmare’ for Turkey – Senator Graham,” TRT World, January 19, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/us-arming-ypg-created-a-nightmare-for-turkey-senator-graham-23443>.

<sup>218</sup> “US Imposes Sanctions on Turkey Over Syria Operation,” *Hürriyet*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-imposes-sanctions-on-turkey-over-syria-operation-147508>.

<sup>219</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 34.

<sup>220</sup> Thomas, *SOCOM: Policing the World*, 28:27 to 28:44.

angels,” and that the US had defeated ISIS with the help of “many allies.”<sup>221</sup> The careless abandonment of a partner that was once lionized as critical to the success of anti-ISIS operations served as a warning to all American allies that the US was not prepared to fulfill its commitments.<sup>222</sup> In the end, the US response to Operation Peace Spring had created an increased trust deficit with both Turkey and the Kurds.



**Map 4: Syria one month after Turkey's Operation Peace Spring<sup>223</sup>**

The operation also resulted in a number of significant outcomes among the Syrian conflict's principal actors, including a deal between the SDF and the Assad regime, which invited Syrian government forces into Kurdish controlled areas to prevent a

<sup>221</sup> Koleilat Khatib and Al-Barasneh, *US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)*, 27.

<sup>222</sup> Gallia Lindenstauss and Eldad Shavit, "Turkey's Offensive in Northeastern Syria: The Expected, the Surprising, and the Still Unknown," Institute for National Security Studies, 2019, 4. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep19524>.

<sup>223</sup> Aras, *Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in Northern Syria: One Month On*.

wider Turkish assault. Additionally, to conclude the operation, Ankara signed ceasefire agreements with both the US and Russia,<sup>224</sup> giving Turkey control of the border strip between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, with Russian assurances that all YPG elements would be subsequently removed from adjoining areas.<sup>225</sup>

Overall, Operation Peace Spring was a manifestation of the level at which Turkey prioritizes the fight against YPG empowerment and the prospect of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Since 2014, Turkey had “tried every means possible to persuade Washington to end its support to the PYD/YPG.”<sup>226</sup> In the face of unfulfilled guarantees, stalled agreements, mixed messages, and an overall dismissal of its national security concerns, Turkey frequently turned to Russia, the main power broker in Syria since 2015, to meet its security objectives. Ankara’s warming relations with Moscow would become an additional source of concern for Washington, and add a new dimension to the crisis in Turkish-American relations.

### **3.4. A Change in Strategic Partners: The Turkish-Russian Rapprochement**

The US policy of retrenchment, which manifested a clear unwillingness for further direct involvement in the Middle East, created a power vacuum in the region which was soon exploited by Russia. The Russian Federation’s direct intervention into the Syrian civil war in September of 2015 was a major turning point in the conflict, shifting the balance of power decisively in favor of the Assad regime, a traditional ally of Moscow since the Cold War era.<sup>227</sup> The Russian intervention, aimed at preserving Assad, also positioned Moscow as the main power broker in Syria, and served as a

---

<sup>224</sup> Umut Aras, “Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in Northern Syria: One Month On,” Al Jazeera, November 8, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/8/turkeys-operation-peace-spring-in-northern-syria-one-month-on>.

<sup>225</sup> Fehim Taştekin, “Erdoğan Threatens Fresh Military Campaign in Syria,” Al Monitor, October 15, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/erdogan-threatens-fresh-military-campaign-syria>.

<sup>226</sup> Ertem and Karadeniz, *Lost in Translation: A System Level Analysis of the Turkish-US Alliance Under the Trump and Obama Administrations*, 23-24.

<sup>227</sup> Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 228-229.

means by which to reassert Russia's role as a dominant power in international politics.<sup>228</sup> The Russian preeminence in Syria after 2015 would lead to significant shifts in Turkish foreign policy. After an initial period of intense conflict between the two countries, regional developments and domestic events within Turkey would lead to a rapid rapprochement, fostering Turkey's view of Russia as a great power balancer and counterweight to the US in Syria.

With Russian military support buttressing Assad by the end of 2015, Turkey redirected its priorities away from toppling the Syrian regime, and narrowed its focus to combatting the YPG.<sup>229</sup> Turkey's policy shift from regime change, concurrent with its increasing alienation from the US, would eventually lead to Turkish-Russian alignment in Syria. However, the rapprochement between the two countries would be achieved only after navigating a major crisis in bilateral relations. From the start of the Syrian civil war, Turkey and Russia took opposing sides in the conflict. While Moscow was unwavering in its support for Assad, Ankara backed and hosted the Syrian opposition. The two countries' conflicting positions provoked a crisis in bilateral ties when in November of 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 jet, stating that the aircraft had penetrated Turkish air space.<sup>230</sup> Russia denied these claims, and the event set off an exchange of hostile and uncompromising rhetoric between Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin. A Russian boycott of Turkish goods and services followed, taking "a major toll" on Turkey's economy, "which had been heavily dependent on Russia since at least 2005."<sup>231</sup>

In addition to economic consequences, the Turkish-Russian discord also triggered political and military repercussions for Turkey. In early 2016, Russia offered direct

---

<sup>228</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 26.

<sup>229</sup> Tsurkov, *Who Are Turkey's Proxy Fighters in Syria?*

<sup>230</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 32.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

support to the YPG in Afrin as part of a strategy to punish Turkey,<sup>232</sup> helping the group in its efforts to capture the Menagh air base from the Syrian opposition (as discussed in chapter three). Moreover, Russia's Foreign Ministry made diplomatic overtures to the Syrian Kurds, publicly supporting their participation in negotiations over Syria's future,<sup>233</sup> and inviting the YPG to open offices in Moscow.<sup>234</sup> Yet despite this dark period in Turkish-Russian relations, the two countries would restore their bilateral ties in less than a year's time, as sudden and unforeseen domestic developments in Turkey sparked a warming of their relationship.

On July 15, 2016, President Erdoğan and his AKP government survived a deadly coup attempt. The failed putsch, quelled by popular opposition, was "a monumental turning point in Turkey's political history."<sup>235</sup> The shocking event resulted in the deaths of 251 individuals, as crowds resisted tank fire and air assaults from rogue military units.<sup>236</sup> Erdoğan himself narrowly escaped with his life, "leaving the resort where he was vacationing just minutes before an assassination squad descended on his hotel."<sup>237</sup> Yet in the aftermath of Turkey's trauma, Ankara received radically different responses from US and Russian officials. In the days following the coup attempt, Putin offered his "unconditional support" to Erdoğan, and the two leaders vowed a swift revival of their bilateral relations.<sup>238</sup> Claims were even made in Turkish mainstream media that

---

<sup>232</sup> Stein, *Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward*, 13.

<sup>233</sup> "Russia: Kurds Must be Included in Syria Peace Talks," Rudaw, December 16, 2015, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/161220152?keyword=ISIS>.

<sup>234</sup> "Syria's Kurds to Open First European Office in Moscow," Rudaw, February 7, 2016, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/070220161>.

<sup>235</sup> "Turkey's Failed Coup Attempt: All You Need to Know," Al Jazeera, July 15, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/15/turkeys-failed-coup-attempt-all-you-need-to-know>.

<sup>236</sup> Andrew Wilks, "Still Not Over: Emotions High 5 Years After Failed Turkey Coup," Al Jazeera, July 15, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/15/still-not-over-emotions-high-5-years-after-failed-turkey-coup>.

<sup>237</sup> Çağaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, 9.

<sup>238</sup> "Turkey Thanks Putin for Unconditional Support Over Coup Attempt," Hürriyet, July 26, 2016, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-thanks-putin-for-unconditional-support-over-coup-attempt---102062>.

Putin had warned Erdoğan of the impending coup attempt.<sup>239</sup> In contrast, the response from Washington left much to be desired in Ankara, as US officials expressed criticism of Erdoğan's post-coup attempt state of emergency policies.

Subsequent to the failed coup, the Turkish state identified US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen as the alleged mastermind, and implemented state of emergency laws aimed at purging his supporters from state institutions. Mass arrests and sackings followed, with some 40,000 jailed<sup>240</sup> and another 100,000 "arbitrarily" dismissed from their jobs in the post-coup attempt crackdown.<sup>241</sup> Additionally, the AKP shuttered around 200 media organizations.<sup>242</sup> Amid the purges, US officials were highly critical of Ankara's policies. Stating their concern for human rights, many viewed Erdoğan's use of emergency decrees as a means by which to consolidate his power and eliminate all political dissidents – not just the supporters of Gülen.<sup>243</sup> This reaction was in stark contrast to the supportive stance taken by Russia, and provided an initial impetus for the Turkish-Russian rapprochement.

Most disturbing to Ankara was Washington's refusal to extradite the Pennsylvania based Gülen back to Turkey, stating insufficient evidence of his involvement in the coup.<sup>244</sup> Faced with a lack of cooperation from the US, Turkish officials began to assert

---

<sup>239</sup> Şener Aktürk, "Relations Between Russia and Turkey Before, During, and After the Failed Coup of 2016," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 105. DOI: 10.25253/99.2019214.06.

<sup>240</sup> Koleilat Khatib and Al-Barasneh, *US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)*, 25.

<sup>241</sup> Andrew Gardner, "Turkey: Professional Annihilation of 100,000 Public Sector Workers in Post-Coup Attempt Purge, Amnesty International, May 22, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/turkey-professional-annihilation-of-100000-public-sector-workers-in-post-coup-attempt-purge/>.

<sup>242</sup> "A Look at Turkey's Post-Coup Crackdown," AP News, August 30, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/dbb5fa7d8f8c4d0d99f297601c83a164>.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Mass Trial Over Turkey's Coup Plot Becomes an Arena of Emotion," New York Times, September 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/10/world/europe/turkey-coup-mass-trial.html>.



that Washington was involved in the coup attempt.<sup>245</sup> Although the allegation was strongly denied by the Obama administration, it was widely believed throughout the Turkish public. Polls conducted in the aftermath of July 15 revealed that the majority of Turks believed the US had backed the coup attempt.<sup>246</sup> The perception of US support for Gülen, coupled with its formally established partnership with the YPG, led to intensified anti-American sentiment and a widespread belief within the Turkish public that the US could not be trusted to fulfill its security guarantees. Furthermore, the AKP government began to perceive the US as a threat to its regime, as the Obama administration appeared to support the Turkish state's two principal enemies – the PKK and Gülen.<sup>247</sup> Under these circumstances, Turkey sought to diversify its partnerships and decrease its reliance on the US. To these ends, Ankara increasingly solicited Russian cooperation to meet its foreign policy and security objectives.

According to Didem Buhari Gülmez, Turkey's three military interventions into Syria "reflect the AKP leadership's growing distrust of the West since the July 15 coup attempt."<sup>248</sup> In each of the interventions, Turkey's normalization with Russia was critical in attaining the necessary coordination to carry out its operations. Ankara relied on Russia's easing of its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) measures, allowing Turkish forces to operate in and near Syrian air space.<sup>249</sup> The Turkish-Russian cooperation permitted Ankara "to act with a relatively free hand in Syria."<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, following the rapprochement, Moscow ceased its military support to the YPG. Turkey

---

<sup>245</sup> Müge Kınacıoğlu and Aylin G. Gürzel Aka, "Turkish Perceptions of Turkey-US Relations During Obama's Presidency: Dialectics of Expectations/Partnership and Disappointment/Estrangement," in *The World Views of the Obama Era: From Hope to Disillusionment*, ed. Matthias Maass (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 160.

<sup>246</sup> Çağrı Erhan and Efe Sıvış, "Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 108. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26300481>.

<sup>247</sup> Gülmez, *The resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perception and Worldviews*, 485.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 484.

<sup>249</sup> Rüma and Çelikpala, *Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater*, 80-81.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 81.

viewed such gestures as proof that Russia better understood its security sensitivities,<sup>251</sup> in contrast to the US, whose policies had consistently underestimated Turkey's national security concerns.

The Turkish-Russian rapprochement was not limited to military cooperation, but also extended to diplomatic initiatives. Along with Iran (Bashar al-Assad's other major supporter), Turkey began to hold talks with Russia under the Astana Process, a forum that Erdoğan referred to as "the only mechanism capable of facilitating concrete steps in Syria."<sup>252</sup> In December of 2016, the three governments issued the Moscow Declaration, a joint statement asserting their full respect for "the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a multiethnic, multi-religious, non-sectarian, democratic and secular state."<sup>253</sup> The Astana Process – which ran parallel to the UN-sponsored Geneva talks and excluded the US – demonstrated Ankara's attempts to balance diplomacy between Washington and Moscow in pursuit of Turkey's interests.

Turkish-Russian cooperation continued in 2018 with the Sochi Agreement, which established a demilitarized zone in the Idlib region of northwest Syria, the last remaining rebel stronghold in the country. The Turkish-Russian agreement effectively held back a massive offensive by regime forces that threatened to send "up to another 800,000 refugees across the border into Turkey,"<sup>254</sup> adding to the burden of caring for the 3.5 million already present. The Turkish-Russian diplomacy over Idlib was described in Turkish government circles as "empowering the Astana Process" and

---

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>252</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "Turkey, Russia and Iran Continue to Shape Syria's Future," SETA, September 21, 2019, <https://www.setav.org/en/turkey-russia-and-iran-continue-to-shape-syrias-future/>.

<sup>253</sup> Karademir, *A Dance of Entanglement: The US-Turkish Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict*, 41.

<sup>254</sup> Martin, *Analysing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East*, 264.

taking “Turkey’s cooperation with Russia in Syria to the next level.”<sup>255</sup> With the Turkish-Russian rapprochement producing undeniable benefits for Turkey’s foreign policy objectives, Ankara soon extended its cooperation with Moscow to include the procurement of Russian weapons systems. In 2017, the news of Turkey’s agreement to purchase the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system was viewed with alarm by US officials, opening up a new battlefield between the two NATO allies, and raising serious questions over Turkey’s commitment to its transatlantic partnership.

### **3.5. The S-400 Crisis, CAATSA, and the Shift of Axis Debate**

The decline of US credibility that accompanied its retrenchment policies and partnership with the YPG set Turkish-American relations on a decisively negative trajectory. Compounded by the American refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen, Turkey no longer viewed the US as capable of ensuring its security. Therefore, the rapprochement with Russia served as a method by which Ankara could diversify its partnerships, acquire a counterweight to US policies, and remedy its dependence on Washington, particularly in the area of defense procurement.

Ankara had long complained that Washington was a “reluctant defense supplier,”<sup>256</sup> refusing to sell Turkey the American-made Patriot missile defense system under an agreement which would include technology transfer. The refusal of technology transfer was unacceptable to the AKP government, which had long prioritized the development of Turkey’s indigenous defense industry.<sup>257</sup> Turkey thus signed an accord with Moscow in December of 2017 to purchase the S-400 system from Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport, “hoping it was the first step toward an eventual joint

---

<sup>255</sup> Burhanettin Duran, “Idlib Crisis Ends with Major Diplomatic Victory for Turkey,” SETA, September 19, 2018, <https://www.setav.org/en/idlib-crisis-ends-with-major-diplomatic-victory-for-turkey/>.

<sup>256</sup> Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı and Şaban Kardaş, “A Dual Framework for the Turkey-US Security Relationship,” German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2021, 4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30235>.

<sup>257</sup> Ali Balcı, “A Three-Level Analysis of Turkey’s Crisis with the US-Led Order,” *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26842775>.

venture to produce the missiles in Turkey.”<sup>258</sup> The Turkish-Russian deal greatly exacerbated tensions between Washington and Ankara, and produced multiple negative consequences for Turkey’s economy and defense industry.

Firstly, the purchase of the S-400 threw into doubt Turkey’s participation in the US’s F-35 joint strike fighter program, as American officials expressed concern that the Russian system could extract critical intelligence information on the 100 F-35 stealth fighters that Turkey had purchased from the US.<sup>259</sup> In a New York Times article published in April of 2019 – roughly three months prior to Ankara’s receipt of the S-400 system – four US senators reiterated the American threat to expel Turkey from the F-35 program, stating that the S-400 is “the most advanced system produced to date in Russia’s quest to defeat stealth technology,”<sup>260</sup> and that it posed an unacceptable risk to the program, which the US relied on to “maintain a military advantage in the skies.”<sup>261</sup> Although Ankara repeatedly aimed to ease Washington’s concerns, insisting that the S-400 would not be integrated with NATO systems, and proposing the establishment of a technical working group to ensure the system did not pose a threat to the US or NATO – US officials refused to reconsider.<sup>262</sup> Turkey was subsequently removed from the F-35 program, never receiving any of the 100 aircraft for which it had invested 1.25 billion dollars.<sup>263</sup> Turkish companies were also cut from the program’s manufacturing and supply chain, contributing to further economic loss. The Turkish-American disagreement over the F-35s added one more point of contention to their already beleaguered relationship.

---

<sup>258</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership* 37.

<sup>259</sup> Martin, *Analysing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East*, 269.

<sup>260</sup> Jim Inhofe et al., “A U.S. Fighter Jet or a Russian Missile System. Not Both,” New York Times, April 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/opinion/turkey-united-states-f35conflict.html>.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> “Turkey Says Proposed Working Group to Ease U.S. Worries Over Russian S-400s,” Reuters, April 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa/turkey-says-proposed-working-group-to-ease-u-s-worries-over-russian-s-400s-idUSKCN1RF1SD>.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

A second major consequence of Turkey's S-400 acquisition was the triggering of secondary sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), signed into law in August of 2017 with overwhelming bipartisan support in the US Congress.<sup>264</sup> Section 231 of the legislation obliges the US president to "impose five or more sanctions" on an individual who knowingly "engages in a significant transaction with ... the defense or intelligence sectors of the government of the Russian Federation."<sup>265</sup> On December 14, 2020, the US State Department officially announced its sanctions regime against Turkey, which included a ban on all US export licenses and authorizations to its Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB), as well as an asset freeze and visa restrictions on the institution's president, Dr. İsmail Demir.<sup>266</sup> The sanctions were met with anger from President Erdoğan, who accused the US of "a blatant attack" on Turkey's sovereignty, and deliberate efforts to block the development of the Turkish defense industry in order to keep Turkey subordinate.<sup>267</sup> In the aftermath of the imposed sanctions, Erdoğan questioned the value of Turkey's alliance with the US, and vowed to work toward "total independence"<sup>268</sup> for the country's defense industry, indicating the intent to gain strategic autonomy from the US and NATO.

The Turkish-American dissonance regarding the S-400s produced a third significant outcome – the intensification of debate over Turkey's commitments to NATO and its

---

<sup>264</sup> "H.R.3364 – Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act: 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2017-2018)," Congress.Gov, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/all-actions?overview=closed&q=%7B%22roll-call-vote%22%3A%22all%22%7D&r=36&s=1>.

<sup>265</sup> "Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017," U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, March 2, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/section-231-of-the-countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/>.

<sup>266</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231," U.S. Department of State, December 14, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/caatsa-section-231-imposition-of-sanctions-on-turkish-presidency-of-defense-industries/index.html>.

<sup>267</sup> "Erdoğan: US Sanctions 'Blatant Attack' on Turkey's Sovereignty," TRT World, December 16, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-us-sanctions-blatant-attack-on-turkey-s-sovereignty-42411>.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

perceived shift in strategic orientation. For many Western political officials and pundits, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia, and its procurement of Russian weapons systems which were incompatible with NATO, demonstrated a clear departure from the organization's "original doctrine of collective defense, collective security, and joint integrated weapon platforms."<sup>269</sup> Opponents of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement also accused Turkey of helping Russia exploit opportunities to advance its interests in the Middle East, as well as gain a strategic victory in global arms sales,<sup>270</sup> moves which critics claimed should not be tolerated by either the US or NATO.<sup>271</sup>

Moreover, the backlash against Turkey's S-400 acquisition compounded the already existing skepticism with which many Western observers viewed Turkey-US-NATO relations under the AKP government. This skepticism stemmed from numerous policy divergences, including Ankara's initial refusal to join the anti-ISIS coalition, its vote against UN sanctions on Iran's nuclear program,<sup>272</sup> support for Hamas, and bellicosity towards Israel.<sup>273</sup> In addition to these divergences, in 2013 Erdoğan requested accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), reportedly telling Russian President Putin, "include us in the Shanghai Five, and we will forget about the EU."<sup>274</sup> In his request Erdoğan expressed his preference for the SCO, "noting that he found its values more compatible with Turkey's than those of the EU."<sup>275</sup> Therefore, for many

---

<sup>269</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 46.

<sup>270</sup> James F. Jeffrey, "The Trump Foreign Policy Legacy in the Middle East," Duvar, April 14, 2021, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/the-trump-foreign-policy-legacy-in-the-middle-east-news-57073>.

<sup>271</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 69-70.

<sup>272</sup> Occurring in 2010, before the signing of the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA).

<sup>273</sup> Park, *Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?*, 581-582.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 590.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 590-591.

analysts, Ankara's S-400 acquisition was yet further proof of Turkey's shift from NATO and the West.

Yet, while Turkey was sharply rebuked by American officials for its warming relations with Russia, the US itself had engaged with Moscow in efforts to broker a deal over Syria. In a 2019 *Foreign Affairs* article, Brett McGurk – who had resigned as the special envoy for the global anti-ISIS coalition after Trump's 2018 troop withdrawal announcement – revealed what had been the Pentagon's intended goals in Syria. In addition to the enduring defeat of ISIS and containment of Iran, Pentagon officials had developed a "second track" of negotiations in the event of the Geneva Process's failure.<sup>276</sup> These negotiations sought to broker a deal between Russia and the SDF. In direct opposition to Turkey's objectives in Syria, the deal proposed that Moscow "offer the SDF a measure of military and diplomatic support, and help the group strike a deal with the regime that would incorporate the SDF into the Syrian army and secure political rights for the population in northeast Syria."<sup>277</sup> Such an agreement would have produced the exact conditions Turkey sought to avoid – the legal recognition of a PYD-controlled region in northern Syria, as well as a re-pairing of the Assad regime with the PKK. The revelation of these negotiations only reinforced Turkey's need for greater autonomy from the US, and the diversification of its partnerships in order to meet its foreign policy and national security objectives. Furthermore, the fact that the US must now also negotiate with Russia to reach its goals in Syria demonstrates the reality of US retrenchment policy, which has led to America's declining influence in the Middle East, and in turn, its inability to fulfill its commitments to allies in the region. These realities led to damaging effects on Turkish-American relations, and by the time CAATSA sanctions were officially imposed in late 2020, government officials and publics in both countries had developed deeply negative perceptions of each other.

---

<sup>276</sup> McGurk, *Hard Truths in Syria: American Can't Do More with Less, and it Shouldn't Try*.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

### 3.6. Decline of Government and Public Support for the Turkish-American Alliance

Although anti-Americanism in Turkey had already been prevalent from the beginning of the AKP's rule – due in large part to the unpopularity of the 2003 Iraq invasion and the infamous 'hood incident' in Iraqi Kurdistan's Sulaymaniyah<sup>278</sup> – an intensification of anti-American sentiment was fueled by the US's perceived support for Gülen, and its partnership with the PYD/YPG, which triggered traditional fears and suspicions rooted in Sèvres syndrome. Reinforcing the already pervasive anti-American sentiment was the increasing use of anti-Western rhetoric that accompanied the AKP government's shift toward strategic autonomy.<sup>279</sup> As Ankara shifted to an assertive foreign policy which was increasingly independent of US and Western influence, Turkish pro-government media often celebrated cooperation with Russia, while taking a confrontational stance against the US.<sup>280</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin was "rarely subjected to the criticism and hostile rhetoric that Erdoğan and others in his government routinely directed toward the West."<sup>281</sup> While Turkish leaders have often pushed back against rising anti-Americanism in Turkish society – as in the case of Prime Minister Turgut Özal in the 1980s – Erdoğan has helped to reinforce it.<sup>282</sup>

In addition to the rhetoric emanating from the AKP, in recent years nearly all Turkish political parties have expressed anti-Western sentiment.<sup>283</sup> Furthermore, according to Selçuk Çolakoğlu, Turkish foreign policy has undergone a shift toward Eurasianism,

---

<sup>278</sup> Rubin, *Kurdistan Rising? Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region*, 38-39. US soldiers, allegedly acting on intelligence regarding possible Turkish action against Iraqi Kurdish politicians, raided the compound of Turkish forces, detaining and hooding them.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, 486.

<sup>280</sup> Rüma and Çelikpala, *Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater*, 80.

<sup>281</sup> Park, *Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?*, 591.

<sup>282</sup> Jeffrey, *The Trump Foreign Policy Legacy in the Middle East*

<sup>283</sup> Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change Its Pro-Western Orientation?", Middle East Institute, April 16, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation>.



embracing a political swing toward the East and pursuing defense cooperation with Russia.<sup>284</sup> Overall, the image of “the West” in Turkey no longer holds “the moral, political, and economic weight it used to carry.”<sup>285</sup> Çolakoglu’s assertions are clearly reinforced by recent public polling. According to a 2022 MetroPoll survey, 39.4 percent of Turkish citizens expressed preference for a Russia/China aligned foreign policy, as opposed to the 37.5 percent that favored the EU and US.<sup>286</sup> The US partnership with the PYD/YPG and refusal to extradite Gülen likely have much to do with this pattern.

Concurrently, Turkey’s reputation has also suffered in US political and public circles during the AKP’s rule, in large part due to Erdoğan’s brash populist rhetoric, which critics say only encourages public animosity toward the US and NATO.<sup>287</sup> Furthermore, Erdoğan’s repression of the Gezi Park protests of 2013, as well as his post-coup attempt state of emergency policies, led many in the US to claim that Turkish domestic politics followed an authoritarian trajectory more in line with the type of illiberal democracy practiced by Vladimir Putin and others in Eurasia.<sup>288</sup> These perceptions – taken together with the anger over Turkish military operations against the YPG, Ankara’s alleged cooperation with jihadist groups in Syria, and its purchase of Russian weapons systems – have had damaging effects on Turkey’s image in the US. In recent years many members of Congress have come to view Turkey as non-Western and authoritarian,<sup>289</sup> perceptions that are often reinforced by anti-Turkish groups, such as the Greek, Armenian, and pro-Israel lobbies,<sup>290</sup> and even those still

---

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Kibaroglu and Sazak, *Business as Usual: The US-Turkey Security Partnership*, 109.

<sup>286</sup> Pinar Tremblay, “Turkish Public Support for NATO Declines,” Al-Monitor, March 8, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkish-public-support-nato-declines>.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, 100-101.

<sup>288</sup> Park, *Turkey’s Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?*, 595.

<sup>289</sup> Beyoghlou, *Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership*, 65.

<sup>290</sup> Jeffrey, *The Trump Foreign Policy Legacy in the Middle East*.

holding resentment over Turkey's 2003 denial of access to Turkish military installations for the invasion of Iraq.<sup>291</sup> These days, it is safe to say that Turkey has few supporters in the US Congress.

Compounding the negative perceptions on the part of both countries' politicians and publics have been two additional high-profile disputes – the Pastor Brunson and Halkbank cases. In October of 2016, Turkish authorities arrested İzmir-based American evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson on allegations of providing support to both the Gülen movement and the PKK. Jailed in İzmir and facing a sentence of up to 35 years imprisonment on espionage and terrorism charges,<sup>292</sup> Brunson's case drew the ire of President Trump and US officials, many of whom insisted that Brunson was innocent and being utilized as a political hostage and “bargaining chip” in Turkey's efforts to attain Gülen's extradition from the US.<sup>293</sup> Applying economic pressure in attempt to secure Brunson's release, Washington imposed trade tariffs, as well as sanctions on Turkey's justice and interior ministers, causing significant depreciation of the Turkish lira and exacerbating the country's economic troubles. Ankara responded with its own tariffs on US goods, and Erdoğan accused Washington of attempting to perpetrate an “economic coup” against Turkey.<sup>294</sup> Brunson was eventually sentenced to only three years and one month in prison, and was released in August of 2018 after serving two years in pre-trial detention.<sup>295</sup> However, the dispute left yet another stain on Turkish-American relations.

---

<sup>291</sup> Gülmez, *The Resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews*, 480.

<sup>292</sup> “Trump Tweets Support for US Pastor Jailed in Turkey,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/trump-tweets-support-for-us-pastor-jailed-in-turkey-130473>

<sup>293</sup> Amberin Zaman, “Understanding the Failed Deal with Turkey That Sparked Trump's Fury,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/07/opinion/turkey-andrew-brunson-prison.html>.

<sup>294</sup> “Turkey's President Erdoğan Vows to Challenge Economic Threats,” *TRT World*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-s-president-erdogan-vows-to-challenge-economic-threats-19660>.

<sup>295</sup> “Pastor Brunson Says His Faith Got Him Through His Imprisonment Ordeal,” *VOA*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pastor-brunson-says-his-faith-got-him-through-his-imprisonment-ordeal/4630198.html>

An additional point of contention between the US and Turkey has been the ongoing Halkbank case. In October of 2019, the US Department of Justice announced that the state-owned Turkish lender Halbank was being charged in a six-count indictment with fraud, money laundering, and sanctions offenses “related to the bank’s participation in a multibillion-dollar scheme to evade US sanctions on Iran.”<sup>296</sup> The Department of Justice also alleged that Halkbank’s misconduct had been “supported and protected by high-ranking Turkish government officials.”<sup>297</sup> Erdoğan, in response, called the US decision “ugly,” and questioned its timing amid Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring, suggesting that the US charges were a retaliation for Turkey’s contentious Syrian incursion.<sup>298</sup> As the case is ongoing, it is likely to remain a thorn in the side of Turkish-American relations, continuing to compound the negative perceptions already held among publics and policy makers in both countries.

Whether the perceptions that the US and Turkey have of each other are accurate or not, they continue to shape public opinion and policy on both sides. To overcome the deterioration of bilateral ties, Ankara and Washington have often attempted to compartmentalize their relations and focus on areas of policy convergence. However, the extent of the antipathy that has arisen between the two countries starting with the American policy of support to the YPG, will make it difficult for them to repair their alliance, as the Turkish-American relationship now faces “almost total hostility” on the part of each’s population and political elites.<sup>299</sup> In January of 2021, as Donald Trump’s presidency came to an end, president-elect Joe Biden inherited a US-Turkey relationship in crisis, which showed little promise for immediate improvement.

---

<sup>296</sup> “Turkish Bank Charged in Manhattan Federal Court for Its Participation in a Multibillion-Dollar Iranian Sanctions Evasion Scheme,” United States Department of Justice, October 15, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/turkish-bank-charged-manhattan-federal-court-its-participation-multibillion-dollar-iranian>.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Laura Pitel, “Erdoğan Attacks ‘Ugly’ US Decision on Turkey’s Halkbank,” Financial Times, October 16, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/1b2b76fe-f00e-11e9-ad1e-4367d8281195>.

<sup>299</sup> Jeffrey, *The Trump Foreign Policy Legacy in the Middle East*.

With Biden taking office on January 20, 2021, the possibility of reaching solutions to the major points of contention – US support for the PYD/YPG and Turkey’s retainment of the S-400 system – appeared even less likely. During his tenure as Vice President under Obama, as well as during his presidential campaign, Biden continuously adopted a critical stance toward the policies of Erdoğan’s AKP government. His harshest statements came during his candidacy for the presidency, when in an interview for the New York Times Biden accused Erdoğan of being an autocrat, criticized his policies toward the Kurds, and vowed to embolden the Turkish opposition in their efforts to defeat him in upcoming elections.<sup>300</sup> Video of the interview later went viral in Turkey, angering both AKP and main opposition CHP officials alike,<sup>301</sup> and illustrating the uphill battle that the Turkish-American relationship would continue to face under the Biden administration.

Concerns have also arisen in Ankara over the Pro-Kurdish records of Biden and members of his administration. Lloyd Austin, Biden’s Secretary of Defense, was one of the first members of CENTCOM to coordinate with the YPG, and thus attributes a high degree of importance to its role in the fight against ISIS.<sup>302</sup> Yet, perhaps most concerning to Ankara is Biden’s selection of Brett McGurk as the Middle East and North Africa coordinator for the National Security Council. McGurk has long been an outspoken opponent of Erdoğan’s policies in Syria, and there is “hardly another figure in US diplomacy who has established as strong links to the Kurdish authorities” in Rojava.<sup>303</sup> Given the connections between the YPG and top Biden administration officials, as well as the reassured commitment that Biden has given to the group in efforts to prevent an ISIS resurgence, it is likely that the Turkish-American

---

<sup>300</sup> Pappas Post, “Joe Biden’s Comments on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,” December 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAUm7-ouUdE>.

<sup>301</sup> Al Jazeera, “Turkey Condemns Biden’s Criticism of ‘Autocrat’ Erdoğan,” August 16, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/16/turkey-condemns-bidens-criticism-of-autocrat-erdogan>.

<sup>302</sup> Jasim, *Biden’s Challenge: Kurdish Autonomy and Turkish Expansionism*, 8.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

disagreement over the YPG will remain an ongoing and principal point of contention for the foreseeable future.

In addition to the ongoing divergence over the PYD/YPG, Turkish-American disagreement over Turkey's retention of the S-400 system has continued to strain their relationship. Furthermore, Erdoğan has expressed his interest in purchasing a second S-400 battery as well as Russian stealth fighter jets,<sup>304</sup> a move that would trigger even harsher US sanctions. In late 2021, Ankara and Moscow announced their collaboration in regards to technology transfer and joint production of the S-400 system, further cementing their defense ties.<sup>305</sup> Such developments appear to preclude any short-term resolution to the S-400 issue.

Yet, despite the grim prognosis, Turkish-American relations have a long history of overcoming major crises, and the possibility of a US/NATO-Turkey convergence over Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine may provide relief to their strained partnership. The Ukraine crisis has served as a clear reminder of Turkey's significance within NATO. In an important move, Ankara used its authority under the Montreux Convention to restrict the passage of warships through the Turkish Straits to the Black Sea, an act which helped to prevent an escalation of the crisis.<sup>306</sup> Furthermore, sharing good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, Turkey has led efforts to find a resolution to the conflict by hosting diplomatic talks between Moscow and Kyiv. These efforts drew praise from Joe Biden, who in a phone call to Erdoğan expressed appreciation for Turkey's diplomacy, and reaffirmed the two countries' joint support for Ukraine.<sup>307</sup>

---

<sup>304</sup> Gönül Tol, "The Biden Administration and the Middle East: Turkey," Middle East Institute, 2021, 47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34016.23>.

<sup>305</sup> "Turkey, Russia Launch Cooperation for Joint Production of S-400 Components," Duvar, November 15, 2021, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/russia-turkey-launch-cooperation-for-joint-production-of-s-400-components-news-59540>.

<sup>306</sup> Fırat Kozok, "Turkey to Restrict Transit of Russian Warships Through Straits," Bloomberg, February 28, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-28/turkey-to-restrict-transit-of-russian-warships-through-straits>.

<sup>307</sup> Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Pro-Western Policy Reversal Reveals Erdoğan's Dilemma," Al-Monitor, March 16, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkeys-pro-western-policy-reversal-reveals-erdogans-dilemma>.

As the conflict continues to unfold, convergence over support for Ukraine could serve as a lifeline for the long-estranged US-Turkey relationship.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In 2014, amid vast territorial gains by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the Obama administration created a global coalition to counter the rapidly expanding terrorist organization. Militarily overextended from the more-than-decade long ‘War on Terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US relied on coalition airstrikes and local surrogate fighters in its counterterrorism efforts.<sup>308</sup> The US-YPG partnership that was formed in the struggle to repel the Islamic State from the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane in 2014, can be identified as a starting point for the now eight-year-long erosion of Turkish-American bilateral relations.

Despite the YPG’s known links to the PKK, support for the group became official US policy in 2015. Rebranded as the Syrian Democratic Forces and trained and equipped as a proxy against ISIS, the group’s extensive territorial expansion along Turkey’s southern border was perceived as a security threat by Ankara. As the US continuously glorified the YPG as ISIS fighting heroes in its public relations efforts, and repeatedly reneged on agreements that would ameliorate Turkey’s security concerns, Ankara’s distrust of Washington escalated. Between 2016 and 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces, along with Turkish-backed Syrian opposition fighters, conducted three military offensives into northern Syria to clear YPG elements from critical positions along the Turkish-Syrian border, a manifestation of the growing skepticism with which Turkey viewed US assurances to guarantee its security.<sup>309</sup>

---

<sup>308</sup> Meoni, *US Policy in Syria: Implications of Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces*.

<sup>309</sup> Gülmez, *The resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perception and Worldviews*, 485.

Throughout the course of its campaign against ISIS, the US has proven to be an unreliable partner to both its 70-year NATO ally Turkey and its YPG partners on the ground, often abandoning one to please the other while ultimately proving untrustworthy to both. Moreover, in its single-focused and short-sighted mission to defeat ISIS, the US fought one terrorist organization by arming, strengthening, and legitimizing another terrorist organization affiliate. In effect, the Obama administration's retrenchment policies (retained by both the Trump and Biden administrations) prioritized Washington's short-term goal of fighting ISIS at minimal cost to the US, while neglectfully ignoring the possible long-term implications for Turkey's national security and territorial integrity.

Turkey's distrust of Washington as a result of its support to the YPG was compounded by the July 15 coup attempt of 2016, for which Ankara suspected US involvement. This chain of events led to Turkey's increased cooperation with Russia in order to meet its foreign policy objectives in Syria, most notably its operations against the YPG. The US must now accept that Turkey's coordination of its Syria policy with Russia derives from Ankara's fear of the development of Syrian Kurdish autonomy under PYD/YPG control,<sup>310</sup> and a lack of trust in the US ability to fulfill its security guarantees. As Turkish-Russian relations have grown to include defense industry cooperation, it seems that Turkey, despite being a NATO member since 1952, is now more closely aligned with Moscow than with Washington.<sup>311</sup> Furthermore, in recent years Turkey has consistently ranked as having the lowest public support for NATO among member states.<sup>312</sup> Such trends are undoubtedly influenced by the enduring pattern of conflict engendered by US support for the PYD/YPG and perceived involvement in the July 15 coup attempt. As the US relationship with Turkey has now come under the

---

<sup>310</sup>Martin, *Analysing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East*, 276.

<sup>311</sup> Hale, *Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War*, 25.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.



administration of Joe Biden, who is widely viewed as “America’s most pro-Kurdish president,”<sup>313</sup> these patterns are unlikely to change.

Similarly, Turkey’s reputation has also suffered in American political and public circles since the start of the US campaign against ISIS in 2014. Ankara’s reluctance to aid in the defense of Kobane and provide military support to the anti-ISIS coalition led to deep disappointment in Washington. Allegations that Turkey had also failed to close its borders to jihadists crossing into Syria<sup>314</sup> provoked suspicion on the part of US officials that Turkey was at minimum turning a blind eye to ISIS brutality in efforts to contain Kurdish expansion in northern Syria and topple Assad.<sup>315</sup> In 2019, as the Turkish-backed SNA militias gained international notoriety for chanting extremist slogans and committing human rights abuses during Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring, reporting of the incidents created the perception in the US public that Turkey supported extremist militias against the secular, Western-aligned Kurds who were fighting ISIS. These events, in addition to Ankara’s purchase of the S-400 system, soured Turkey’s image within the US public. Overall, accusations between Washington and Ankara over each other’s alleged support for terrorist organizations has created profound distrust and a deep deterioration of their bilateral relationship.

The Eurasianist shift in Turkish foreign policy that resulted from Ankara’s decreased trust in Washington and desire to counterbalance US policies, has triggered alarm in the West and ignited debate regarding Turkey’s commitments to NATO. Many Western analysts have viewed Turkey’s rapprochement with Moscow and purchase of the Russian S-400 system as yet further proof of Turkey’s incompatibility with NATO,

---

<sup>313</sup> Aykan Erdemir, “Joe Biden Will Be America’s Most Pro-Kurdish President,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, August 16, 2020, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/08/16/biden-will-be-most-pro-kurdish-president/>.

<sup>314</sup> McGurk, *Hard Truths in Syria: America Can’t Do More with Less, and it Shouldn’t Try*.

<sup>315</sup> Amberin Zaman, “Is ISIS Going All Out On Turkey?,” Wilson Center, January, 2016, 1. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/is\\_isis\\_going\\_all\\_out\\_on\\_turkey.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/is_isis_going_all_out_on_turkey.pdf).

citing a long list of policy divergences between Ankara and its Western allies.<sup>316</sup> Not least among Western concerns is the AKP government's perceived authoritarian trajectory, which critics say more closely aligns with the illiberal practices of leaders such as Vladimir Putin. Additionally, as Turkey has sought to diversify its alliances and gain strategic autonomy from the US, increased anti-Western rhetoric on the part of Erdoğan and AKP officials has added to the perception that Turkey seeks to counter US interests in the Middle East.<sup>317</sup> These developments have led to speculation about Turkey's future in NATO, with some Western analysts even questioning "whether it is really acceptable to retain Turkey" as an alliance member.<sup>318</sup>

Yet despite the debate over its future in NATO, there is no denying the benefits that Turkey brings to the alliance, chiefly among them the second largest military force and access to geostrategic military installations such as İncirlik air base and Kürecik radar station. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 has served as a recent reminder of Turkey's vital importance to NATO, especially as Ankara's authority to restrict the passage of battleships into the Black Sea under the Montreux Convention has prevented an escalation of the crisis. Furthermore, Turkey's support for Ukraine, in concert with the US and NATO, constitutes a possible area of converge upon which the US and Turkey can start to mend their fractured relationship. This will be challenging, however, as the extent of the support Ankara can offer Ukraine will remain limited by Turkey's dependence on Russian energy, trade, and tourism, as well as the need for continued cooperation with Moscow in Syria. As the conflict unfolds, Turkey will be forced to continue a delicate balancing act to enhance cooperation with the US and NATO in support of Ukraine, while avoiding moves that may provoke retaliation from Moscow.

---

<sup>316</sup> Park, *Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?* 581-582.

<sup>317</sup> "Menendez Makes Case for Recalibrating U.S.-Turkey Relationship Under Erdogan," United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, November 5, 2019, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/menendez-makes-case-for-recalibrating-us-turkey-relationship-under-erdogan>.

<sup>318</sup> Park, *Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?* 581-582.

Above all, the potential for Turkish-American rapprochement may be best served by a willingness on the part of both sides to understand each other's legitimate concerns, and to limit populist rhetoric on the part of political elites that will only serve to embitter their respective publics and make future efforts at normalization more difficult. Turkey, as a longtime strategic partner could recognize that US support for the PYD/YPG, which is underpinned by Middle East retrenchment policies, is the result of realist political motives to rebalance foreign policy commitments in line with post-George W. Bush era decreased capacities, as opposed to secret agendas to partition Turkey. Likewise, the US could better fulfill its role as an ally by recognizing Turkey's legitimate security concerns – which stem from a long and traumatic struggle against PKK terrorism – and following through on its stated promises to ease those concerns. The short-sighted American policy of prioritizing cost-effectiveness over a NATO ally's national security must be replaced with one that takes into account the potentially harmful long-term implications of its actions.

This thesis has sought to synthesize both Turkish and American viewpoints on the principal areas of contention between the two countries in effort to delineate the progressive deterioration of their bilateral relationship, beginning with the Turkish-American policy divergence over the YPG in Syria. In doing so, it has aimed to provide a comprehensive examination of the current crisis in US-Turkey relations, and to highlight the concerns and grievances expressed on both sides. By these means, it seeks to provide a foundation from which future analyses and policy solutions can be drawn. As an examination of the literature on Turkish-American relations clearly points out, the US-Turkey alliance is still widely viewed as too important for either country to abrogate. According to Ünlühisarcıklı and Kardaş, “while some may argue that it's time for the US and Turkey to decouple ... it would be unlikely that either could find a substitute for their current security partnership.”<sup>319</sup> For this reason, academic research focused on identifying policy divergences and finding policy

---

<sup>319</sup> Ünlühisarcıklı and Kardaş, *A Dual Framework for the Turkey-US Security Relationship*, 5-6.

solutions is essential for rebuilding a relationship that has long brought benefit to both sides.<sup>320</sup>

---

<sup>320</sup> Coffey, *Start Small and Think Big to Rebuild the US-Turkey Relationship*, 13-14.

## REFERENCES

- Aktürk, Şener. "Relations Between Russia and Turkey Before, During and After the Failed Coup of 2016." *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 97-113. DOI: 10.25253/99.2019214.06.
- Akyeşilmen, Nezir, Vanessa Tinker, and Mohammed Ishmeal. "US-Turkey Relations in the Context of the Syrian Conflict: From Cooperation to Confrontation." *Pzegląd Strategiczny* 13 (2020): 79-96. DOI: 10.14746/ps.2020.1.5.
- Al Jazeera. "Kurdish Group Claims 'Revenge Murder' on Turkish Police." July 22, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/7/22/kurdish-group-claims-revenge-murder-on-turkish-police>. Accessed December 15, 2021.
- Al Jazeera. "Turkey Condemns Biden's Criticism of 'Autocrat' Erdoğan," August 16, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/16/turkey-condemns-bidens-criticism-of-autocrat-erdogan>. Accessed January 12, 2022.
- Al Jazeera. "Turkey's Failed Coup Attempt: All You Need to Know." July 15, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/15/turkeys-failed-coup-attempt-all-you-need-to-know>. Accessed February 22, 2022.
- Al-Kati, Mohannad. "The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study." *AlMuntaqa* 2, no. 1 (2019): 45-61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.31430/almuntaqa.2.1.0045>.
- Al-Khalidi, Suleiman. "Kurdish Forces Said to Take Air Base Near Turkish Border." Reuters. February 11, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/kurdish-forces-said-to-take-air-base-near-turkish-border-idUSKCN0VK0E8>. Accessed January 19, 2022.
- Allahverdi, Safvan. "US Concerned About Situation in Afrin: State Dept." Anadolu Agency. January 21, 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-concerned-about-situation-in-afrin-state-dept/1038036>. Accessed February 20, 2022.
- Altuğ, Seda. "The Syrian Uprising and Turkey's Ordeal with the Kurds." *Dialectical Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (March 2013): 123-130. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42635385>.

- Amnesty International. "Syria: Damning Evidence of War Crimes and Other Violations by Turkish Forces and Their Allies." October 18, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/>. Accessed February 24, 2022.
- Amnesty International. "Syria: 'We Had Nowhere to Go'-Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria." October 13, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/>. Accessed February 28, 2022.
- Anadolu Agency. "Operation Peace Spring Starts in N. Syria: Erdoğan." October 9, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/operation-peace-spring/operation-peace-spring-starts-in-n-syria-erdogan/1607147>. Accessed December 17, 2021.
- AP News. "A Look at Turkey's Post-Coup Crackdown." August 30, 2018. <https://apnews.com/article/dbb5fa7d8f8c4d0d99f297601c83a164>. Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Aras, Umut. "Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in Northern Syria: One Month On." Al Jazeera. November 8, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/8/turkeys-operation-peace-spring-in-northern-syria-one-month-on>. Accessed December 17, 2021.
- Aydıntaşbaş Aslı and Kemal Kirişci. "The United States and Turkey: Friends, Enemies, or Only Interests?" Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings. April, 2017. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aydintasbas-kirisci\\_united-states-and-turkey.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aydintasbas-kirisci_united-states-and-turkey.pdf). Accessed May 26, 2022.
- Avundukluoğlu, Emin. "US Risks Relations with Turkey Over Border Force Plan." Anadolu Agency. January 17, 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/us-risks-relations-with-turkey-over-border-force-plan-/1033080>. Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Balcı, Ali. "A Three-Level Analysis of Turkey's Crisis with the US-Led Order." *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 13-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26842775>.
- BBC News. "Iraqi Kurds Decisively Back Independence in Referendum." September 27, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41419633>. Accessed December 18, 2021.
- BBC News. "Islamic State Conflict: Syrian Kurds Seize Tal Abyad." June 15, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33132809>. Accessed February 15, 2022.

- BBC Trending. "Who is the 'Angel of Kobane'?" November 3, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-29853513>. Accessed December 16, 2021.
- Beyoghlow, Kamal A. "Turkey and the United States on the Brink: Implications for NATO and the US-Turkish Strategic and Military Partnership." US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. January, 2020. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep24340>. Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Biermann, Philipp. "The Kurds as Allies of the West in Syria and Iraq: Effective Partnership or Political Powder Keg?" Federal Academy for Security Policy. 2017. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep22179>. Accessed November 27, 2021.
- Brands, Hal. "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy." *Washington Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (2017): 101-125. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1261557>.
- Bruno, Greg. "Inside the Kurdistan Worker's Party." Council on Foreign Relations. October 19, 2007. <https://www.cfr.org/background/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk>. Accessed January 10, 2022.
- Buhari Gülmez, Didem. "The resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perception and Worldviews." *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (June 2020): 475-492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777038>.
- CBS News. "Turkey Blasts Clinton's Syria Proposal: Isn't America Our Ally?" October 11, 2016. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/turkey-hillary-clinton-arming-syria-syrian-kurdish-militia-pkk-terrorists/>. Accessed May 26, 2022.
- Cem, İsmail. "Statement Made by İsmail Cem, Foreign Minister, On the Special Security Meeting Held Between Turkey and Syria." Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. October 20, 1998. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/p\\_statement-made-by-ismail-cem\\_-foreign-minister\\_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria\\_br\\_october-20\\_-1998\\_br\\_unofficial-translation\\_p\\_en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/p_statement-made-by-ismail-cem_-foreign-minister_-on-the-special-security-meeting-held-between-turkey-and-syria_br_october-20_-1998_br_unofficial-translation_p_en.mfa). Accessed December 20, 2022.
- Coffey, Luke. "Start Small and Think Big to Rebuild the US-Turkey Relationship." *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 2 (2020): 11-22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26918119>.
- Congress.Gov. "H.R.3364 – Countering America's Adversaries Though Sanctions Act: 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2017-2018)." Accessed March 10, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/all-actions?overview=closed&q=%7B%22roll-call-vote%22%3A%22all%22%7D&r=36&s=1>.

- Crowley, Michael. "Crisis in Syrian City Exposes Fissures in Obama's Anti-ISIS Coalition." *Time Magazine*. October 10, 2014. <https://time.com/3491192/obama-isis-kobani/>. Accessed January 10, 2022.
- Çağaptay, Soner. *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2017.
- Çağaptay, Soner and Tyler Evans. "The End of Pax Adana." Washington Institute for Near East Policy. August 25, 2012. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/end-pax-adana>. Accessed January 12, 2022.
- Çalışkan, Mehmet Emin. "Turkey Denies Turning Blind Eye to Islamic State as Bombing Stokes Anger." Reuters. July 21, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-suruc/turkey-denies-turning-blind-eye-to-islamic-state-as-bombing-stokes-anger-idUSKCN0PV16M20150721>. Accessed January 14, 2022.
- Çandar, Cengiz. "Turkey's Pro-Western Policy Reversal Reveals Erdoğan's Dilemma." *Al-Monitor*. March 16, 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkeys-pro-western-policy-reversal-reveals-erdogans-dilemma>. Accessed March 30, 2022.
- Çolakoğlu, Selçuk. "Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change Its Pro-Western Orientation?" Middle East Institute. April 16, 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation>. Accessed March 30, 2022.
- Daily Sabah. "US Ending Engagement with YPG 'Fundamental Necessity' for Manbij Roadmap." November 3 2018. <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/11/03/us-ending-engagement-with-ypg-fundamental-necessity-for-manbij-roadmap-turkish-deputy-fm>. Accessed January 12, 2022.
- Davis, Paul K. et al. *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012.
- Dirik, Dilar. "Western Fascination with 'Badass' Kurdish Women." *Al Jazeera*. October 29, 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/29/western-fascination-with-badass-kurdish-women>. Accessed February 20, 2022.
- Duran, Burhanettin. "Idlib Crisis Ends with Major Diplomatic Victory for Turkey." SETA. September 19, 2018. <https://www.setav.org/en/idlib-crisis-ends-with-major-diplomatic-victory-for-turkey/>. Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Duran, Burhanettin. "Turkey, Russia and Iran Continue to Shape Syria's Future." SETA. September 21, 2019. <https://www.setav.org/en/turkey-russia-and-iran-continue-to-shape-syrias-future/>. Accessed December 20, 2021.



- Duvar English. "Turkey Commemorates Victims of Suruç Bombing on Fifth Anniversary." July 20, 2020. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/human-rights/2020/07/20/turkey-commemorates-victims-of-suruc-bombing-on-fifth-anniversary>. Accessed January 11, 2022.
- Duvar English. "Turkey, Russia Launch Cooperation for Joint Production of S-400 Components." November 15, 2021. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/russia-turkey-launch-cooperation-for-joint-production-of-s-400-components-news-59540>. December 14, 2021.
- Erdemir, Aykan. "Joe Biden Will Be America's Most Pro-Kurdish President." Foundation for Defense of Democracies. August 16, 2020. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/08/16/biden-will-be-most-pro-kurdish-president/>. Accessed April 10, 2022.
- Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip. "Turkey is Stepping Up Where Others Fail to Act." Wall Street Journal. October 14, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-is-stepping-up-where-others-fail-to-act-11571093850>. Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Erhan, Çağrı and Efe Sıvış. "Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future." *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 89-116. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26300481>.
- Erllich, Reese. *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*. New York: Prometheus, 2014.
- Fox, Tessa. "Turkey Agrees to Set Up Operation Center for Syria Safe Zone." Al Jazeera. August 7, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/7/turkey-us-agree-to-set-up-operation-centre-for-syria-safe-zone>. Accessed January 11, 2022.
- Fox, Tessa. "Who Exactly Is Turkey Resettling in Syria?" Foreign Policy. December 19, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/19/who-exactly-is-turkey-resettling-in-syria/>. Accessed January 15, 2022.
- Gall, Carlotta. "Mass Trial Over Turkey's Coup Plot Becomes an Arena of Emotion." New York Times. September 10, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/10/world/europe/turkey-coup-mass-trial.html>. Accessed December 20, 2021.
- Gall, Carlotta. "U.S. and Turkey Avoid Conflict by Agreeing on Buffer Zone in Syria." New York Times. August 7, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/world/middleeast/us-turkey-peace-corridor-syria.html>. Accessed December 20, 2021.

- Garamone, Jim. "Building Capabilities, Nurturing Alliances at Heart of U.S. Strategy." Department of Defense, June 27, 2019. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1890082/building-capabilities-nurturing-alliances-at-heart-of-us-strategy/>. Accessed November 17, 2022.
- Gardner, Andrew. "Turkey: Professional Annihilation of 100,000 Public Sector Workers in Post-Coup Attempt Purge." Amnesty International. May 22, 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/turkey-professional-annihilation-of-100000-public-sector-workers-in-post-coup-attempt-purge/>. Accessed December 21, 2021.
- Gerges, Fawaz A. "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?" *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (March 2013): 299-323. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23473538>.
- Gol, Jiyar. "Kurdish 'Angelina Jolie' Devalued by Media Hype." BBC News. September 12, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37337908>. Accessed November 15, 2021.
- Gordon, Michael R. and Eric Schmitt. "Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects." New York Times. May 9, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/us/politics/trump-kurds-syria-army.html>. Accessed February 11, 2022.
- Grigoriadis, Ioannis N. "Friends No More? The Rise of Anti-American Nationalism in Turkey." *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 51-66. <https://doi.org/10.3751/64.1.13>.
- Grigoriadis, Ioannis and Ümit Erol Aras. "US-Turkey Relations Hanging by a Thread: Trump's Re-election." Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy. October 2020. <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Policy-brief-138-Grigoriadis-Aras.pdf>. Accessed January 10, 2022.
- Gutman, Roy. "In Syria, U.S.-Backed Kurdish Fighters Face Trump's Withdrawal – and the Legacy of Their Own Mistakes." The Intercept. December 28, 2018. <https://theintercept.com/2018/12/28/syria-withdrawal-kurds-pkk/>. Accessed November 15, 2021.
- Güner, Serdar Ş and Dilan E. Koç. "Leverages and Constraints for Turkish Foreign Policy in Syrian War: A Structural Balance Approach." *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 15, no. 59 (2018): 89-103. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26605021>.
- Hale, William. "Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War." *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 25-40. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26842776>.

- Hinnebusch, Raymond. "From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA: The Case of Syria." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 391-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455330>.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond. "The Arab Uprisings and MENA Regional States System." *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 11, no. 42 (2014): 7-27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43925849>.
- Human Rights Watch. "Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property." June 14, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/14/syria-turkey-backed-groups-seizing-property#>. Accessed February 16, 2022.
- Human Rights Watch. "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves of Syria." June 19, 2014. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>. Accessed February 20, 2022.
- Hürriyet. "Trump Tweets Support for US Pastor Jailed in Turkey." April 18, 2018. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/trump-tweets-support-for-us-pastor-jailed-in-turkey-130473>. Accessed May 25, 2022.
- Hürriyet. "Turkey Thanks Putin for Unconditional Support Over Coup Attempt." July 26, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-thanks-putin-for-unconditional-support-over-coup-attempt---102062>. Accessed April 11, 2022.
- Hürriyet. "US Imposes Sanctions on Turkey Over Syria Operation." October 15, 2019. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-imposes-sanctions-on-turkey-over-syria-operation-147508>. Accessed February 17, 2022.
- Inhofe, Jim, Bob Menendez, Jack Reed and Jim Risch. "A U.S. Fighter Jet or a Russian Missile System. Not Both." *New York Times*. April 9, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/opinion/turkey-united-states-f35conflict.html>. Accessed February 12, 2022.
- Jasim, Dastan. "Biden's Challenge: Kurdish Autonomy and Turkish Expansionism." German Institute of Global and Area Studies. 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28521>. Accessed November 16, 2021.
- Jeffrey, James F. "The Trump Foreign Policy Legacy in the Middle East." *Duvar*. April 14, 2021. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/the-trump-foreign-policy-legacy-in-the-middle-east-news-57073>. Accessed March 1, 2022.
- Jenkins, Gareth H. "The PKK and the PYD: Comrades in Arms, Rivals in Politics?" *The Turkey Analyst*. April 19, 2016. <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/535-the-pkk-and-the-pyd-comrades-in-arms-rivals-in-politics?.html>. Accessed February 12, 2022.

- Kanat, Kılıç and Kadir Üstün. "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria." *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 4 (2015): 88-97. [https://www.academia.edu/28159701/U.S.-Turkey\\_Realignment\\_on\\_Syria](https://www.academia.edu/28159701/U.S.-Turkey_Realignment_on_Syria).
- Kanat, Kılıç Buğra and Jackson Hannon. "The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations." *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 3 (2018): p. 111-123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12365>.
- Kibaroglu, Mustafa and Selim C. Sazak. "Business as Usual: The U.S.-Turkey Security Partnership." *Middle East Policy* 12, no. 4 (2015): 98-112. DOI: [10.1111/mepo.12161](https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12161).
- Kınacıoğlu, Müge and Aylin G. Gürzel Aka. "Turkish Perceptions of Turkey-US Relations During Obama's Presidency: Dialectics of Expectations/Partnership and Disappointment/Estrangement." In *The World Views of the Obama Era: From Hope to Disillusionment*, edited by Matthias Maass, 141-170. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Koleilat Khatib, Dania and Ayman Saleh Al-Barasneh. "US-Turkish Relations in the Light of the Syrian Crisis (2011-2019)." In *The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations*, edited by Dania Koleilat Khatib, 13-30. Singapore: Springer, 2021.
- Kozok, Firat. "Turkey to Restrict Transit of Russian Warships Through Straits." Bloomberg, February 28, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-28/turkey-to-restrict-transit-of-russian-warships-through-straits>. Accessed March 10, 2022.
- Lindenstauss, Gallia and Eldad Shavit. "Turkey's Offensive in Northeastern Syria: The Expected, the Suprising, and the Still Unknown." Institute for National Security Studies. 2019. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep19524>. Accessed February 11, 2022.
- Lund, Aron. "Why the Victory in Kobane Matters." Carnegie Middle East Center. February 13, 2015. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59061>. Accessed December 16, 2021.
- Maass, Matthias. "The World Views of Barack Obama." In *The World Views of the Obama Era: From Hope to Disillusionment*, edited by Matthias Maass, 1-16. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Marcus, Aliza. "Turkey's PKK: Rise, Fall, and Rise Again?" *World Policy Journal* 24, no. 1 (2007): 75-84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40210079>.
- Martin, Lenore G. "Analysing a Tumultuous Relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 262-277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2019.1605571>.

- McGurk, Brett. "Hard Truths in Syria: America Can't Do More with Less, and it Shouldn't Try." *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May/June 2019): 69-84.  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-04-16/hard-truths-syria>.
- Meoni, Brandi. "US Policy in Syria: Implications of Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces." Unpublished research paper, January 30 2021, typescript.
- Middle East Monitor. "US Did Not Make Any Political Promises to the YPG Says Ex-Envoy to Syria." April 6, 2021.  
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210406-us-did-not-make-any-political-promises-to-the-ypg-says-ex-envoy-to-syria/>. Accessed March 2, 2022.
- Obama, Barack. "Statement by the President on ISIL." Obama White House Archives. September 10, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/Statement-president-isil-1>. Accessed November 21, 2021.
- Obama, Barack. "The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning." Obama White House Archives. June 4, 2009.  
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>. Accessed November 20, 2021.
- Orton, Kyle. "The Secular Foreign Fighters of the West in Syria." *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 3 (2018): 157-178. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26469849>.
- Orton, Kyle. "In Syria, PKK Mimics Assad's Propaganda and the West Falls for It." *The Arab Weekly*. November 24, 2019. <https://thearabweekly.com/syria-pkk-mimics-assads-propaganda-and-west-falls-it>. Accessed December 19, 2021.
- Paasche, Till F. and Michael M. Gunter. "Revisiting Western Strategies Against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria." *Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (2016): 9-29.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43698617>.
- Pappas Post. "Joe Biden's Comments on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan." December 16, 2019. 2:13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAUm7-ouUdE>. Accessed April 2, 2022.
- Park, Bill. "Regional Turmoil, the Rise of Islamic State, and Turkey's Multiple Kurdish Dilemmas." *International Journal* 71, no. 3 (September 2016): 450-467. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26414042>.
- Park, Bill. "Turkey's Isolated Stance: An Ally No More, or Just the Usual Turbulence?" *International Affairs* 491, no. 3 (May 2015): 581-600.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24539148>.

- Pitel, Laura. "Erdoğan Attacks 'Ugly' US Decision on Turkey's Halkbank." *Financial Times*. October 16, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/1b2b76fe-f00e-11e9-ad1e-4367d8281195>. Accessed May 25, 2022.
- Pollack, Kenneth M. "The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction." Brookings Institution. December 1, 2006. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-failure-in-iraq-a-retrospective-analysis-of-the-reconstruction/>. Accessed December 18, 2021.
- Pompeo, Michael R. "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231." U.S. Department of State. December 14, 2020. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/caatsa-section-231-imposition-of-sanctions-on-turkish-presidency-of-defense-industries/index.html>. Accessed March 1, 2022.
- Powell, Colin L. "Remarks to the United Nations Security Council." U.S. Department of State Archive. February 5, 2003. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/17300.htm>. Accessed December 15, 2021.
- Reporters Without Borders. "How Kurdistan's PYD Keeps the Media and News Providers in Line." May 1, 2014. <https://rsf.org/en/news/how-kurdistans-pyd-keeps-media-and-news-providers-line>. Accessed February 22, 2022.
- Reuters. "Turkey Says Proposed Working Group to Ease U.S. Worries Over Russian S-400s." April 3, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa/turkey-says-proposed-working-group-to-ease-u-s-worries-over-russian-s-400s-idUSKCN1RF1SD>. Accessed March 18, 2022.
- Rose, Gideon. "What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 5 (September/October 2015): 2-12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483732>.
- Rubin, Michael. "Kurdistan Rising? Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region." American Enterprise Institute. July 1, 2016. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep03254.6>. Accessed January 8, 2022.
- Rudaw. "Russia: Kurds Must be Included in Syria Peace Talks." December 16, 2015. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/161220152?keyword=ISIS>. Accessed February 21, 2022.
- Rudaw. "Syria's Kurds to Open First European Office in Moscow." February 7, 2016. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/070220161>. Accessed February 21, 2022.
- Rudaw. "YPG Rename Captured Syrian Air Base After PKK Leader Öcalan." February 18, 2016. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/180220162>. Accessed January 12, 2022.

- Rüma, İnan and Mitat Çelikpala. "Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater." *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 16, no. 62 (2019): 65-84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26664886>.
- Salih, Cale. "Turkey, the Kurds, and the Fight Against Islamic State." European Council on Foreign Relations. 2015. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21649>. Accessed January 10, 2022.
- Sarı Ertem, Helin and Radiye Funda Karadeniz. "Lost in Translation: A System Level Analysis of the Turkish-U.S. Alliance Under the Obama and Trump Administrations. *Perceptions* 24, no. 1 (2019): 7-38. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/10c6a91c165fc946be0d6fe95bdb46c1/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=237752>.
- Sarı Karademir, Burcu. "A Dance of Entanglement." *Uluslararası İlişkiler/International Relations* 16, no. 62 (2019): 27-43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26664884>.
- Schumer, Charles E. and Carolyn B. Maloney. "War at any Cost?: The Total Economic Costs of the War Beyond the Federal Budget." United States Joint Economic Committee. February, 2008. [https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/e8a3298d-0007-40c8-9293-8bdb74e6d318/febiraqupdate0.pdf](https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/e8a3298d-0007-40c8-9293-8bdb74e6d318/febiraqupdate0.pdf). Accessed December 19, 2021.
- Senate Armed Services Committee. "U.S. Senator Graham Criticizes U.S. Military Strategy in Syria." C-Span. May 5, 2016. 2:10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-g8RVtYBM4>. Accessed February 9, 2022.
- Seren, Merve. "Euphrates Shield Revisited." Anadolu Agency. August 26, 2017. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/euphrates-shield-revisited/894249>. Accessed February 17, 2022.
- Smith, Patrick. "The Kurdish 'Angels of Kobane' are Fighting on a Second Front." Newsweek. December 11, 2014. <https://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/19/angels-kobane-are-fighting-second-front-290835.html>. Accessed December 27, 2021.
- Sofuoğlu, Murat. "Who are the Kurds?" TRT World. June 1, 2018. [https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/who-are-the-kurds--17915?utm\\_source=Facebook&utm\\_medium=Organic&utm\\_campaign=Turkey+Elections&utm\\_content=who-are-the-kurds](https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/who-are-the-kurds--17915?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Organic&utm_campaign=Turkey+Elections&utm_content=who-are-the-kurds). Accessed November 15, 2021.



- Stein, Aaron. "Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward." Atlantic Council. July, 2017. 1-24. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/partner-operations-in-syria/>. Accessed February 20, 2022.
- Taşkömür, Fatima. "Reaching Its Limits in Syria, What is the Next Move for the SDF?" TRT World. November 20, 2017. <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/reaching-its-limits-in-syria-what-is-the-next-move-for-the-sdf--12445>. Accessed March 1, 2022.
- Taştekin, Fehim. "Erdoğan Threatens Fresh Military Campaign in Syria." Al Monitor, October 15, 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/erdogan-threatens-fresh-military-campaign-syria>. Accessed January 2022.
- Teke, Recep Tayyip. "The Kurds of Northern Syria in Western Media: The BBC and VOA coverage (2014-2018)." MSc thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2020. <http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12624875/index.pdf>.
- Thomas, Raymond. "SOCOM: Policing the World." Aspen Institute. July 21, 2017. 59:14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCqCnLjSx7M>. Accessed January 10, 2022.
- Tol, Gönül. "The Biden Administration and the Middle East: Turkey." Middle East Institute. 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34016.23>. Accessed March 30, 2022.
- Tremblay, Pınar. "Turkish Public Support for NATO Declines." Al-Monitor. March 8, 2022. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkish-public-support-nato-declines>. Accessed April 2, 2022.
- TRT World. "Erdoğan: US Sanctions 'Blatant Attack' on Turkey's Sovereignty." December 16, 2020. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-us-sanctions-blatant-attack-on-turkey-s-sovereignty-42411>. Accessed May 25, 2022.
- TRT World. "Turkey's President Erdoğan Vows to Challenge Economic Threats." TRT World. August 18, 2018. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-s-president-erdogan-vows-to-challenge-economic-threats-19660>. Accessed May 26, 2022.
- TRT World. "US Arming YPG 'Created a Nightmare' for Turkey – Senator Graham." January 19, 2019. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/us-arming-ypg-created-a-nightmare-for-turkey-senator-graham-23443>. Accessed February 9, 2022.



- Tsurkov, Elizabeth. "Who Are Turkey's Proxy Fighters in Syria?" *The New York Review*. November 27, 2019. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>. Accessed February 18, 2022.
- Turak, Natasha. "Hundreds of ISIS Prisoners Are Escaping from Camps in Northern Syria Amid Turkish Offensive." *CNBC*. October 14, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/14/isis-prisoners-are-escaping-from-camps-in-syria-amid-turkish-offensive.html>. Accessed February 11, 2022.
- Udum, Şebnem. "Issues in Turkish-US Relations: A Politico-Psychological Analysis Through Problematic Cases." In *Historical Examinations and Current Issues in Turkish-American Relations*, edited by Hüseyin Işıksal and Ozan Örmeci, 221-246. Bern: Peter Lang, 2020.
- Unger, David. "The Foreign Policy Legacy of Barack Obama." *International Spectator* 51, no. 4 (2016): 1-16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2016.1227914>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Turkey Fact Sheet." October, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR-Turkey-One-Pager-Fact-Sheet-Oct2019.pdf>. Accessed February 16, 2022.
- United Nations Security Council. "Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary General." October 30, 2018. <http://undocs.org/s/2018/969>. Accessed January 12, 2022.
- United States Department of Justice. "Turkish Bank Charged in Manhattan Federal Court for Its Participation in a Multibillion-Dollar Iranian Sanctions Evasion Scheme." October 15, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/turkish-bank-charged-manhattan-federal-court-its-participation-multibillion-dollar-iranian>. Accessed May 26, 2022.
- United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. "Menendez Makes Case for Recalibrating U.S.-Turkey Relationship Under Erdogan." November 5, 2019. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/menendez-makes-case-for-recalibrating-us-turkey-relationship-under-erdogan>. Accessed April 20, 2022.
- U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism. "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." Accessed July 22, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>. Accessed November 15, 2021.
- U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation. "Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017." March 2, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/section-231-of-the-countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/>. Accessed March 1, 2022.

- Ünlühisarcıklı, Özgür and Şaban Kardaş. "A Dual Framework for the Turkey-US Security Relationship." German Marshall Fund of the United States. 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30235>. Accessed February 15, 2022.
- Van Buren, Peter. "Why the Invasion of Iraq Was the Single Worst Foreign Policy Decision in American History." The Nation. March 7, 2013. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/why-invasion-iraq-was-single-worst-foreign-policy-decision-american-history/>. Accessed December 11, 2021.
- VOA. "Pastor Brunson Says His Faith Got Him Through His Imprisonment Ordeal." October 26, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pastor-brunson-says-his-faith-got-him-through-his-imprisonment-ordeal/4630198.html>. Accessed May 25, 2022.
- VOA. "Russia, Turkey Condemn US Plans for Syria Border Force." January 15, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-turkey-condemn-us-plans-for-syria-border-force/4208301.html>. Accessed February 18, 2022.
- Wilkens, Katherine. "A Kurdish Alamo: Five Reasons the Battle for Kobane Matters." Carnegie Middle East Center. October 10, 2014. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/56905>. Accessed January 3, 2022.
- Wilks, Andrew. "Still Not Over: Emotions High 5 Years After Failed Turkey Coup." Al Jazeera. July 15, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/15/still-not-over-emotions-high-5-years-after-failed-turkey-coup>. Accessed February 16, 2022.
- Zaman, Amberin. "Is ISIS Going All Out On Turkey?" Wilson Center. January, 2016. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/is\\_isis\\_going\\_all\\_out\\_on\\_turkey.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/is_isis_going_all_out_on_turkey.pdf). Accessed February 17, 2022.
- Zaman, Amberin. "Understanding the Failed Deal with Turkey That Sparked Trump's Fury." New York Times. August 7, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/07/opinion/turkey-andrew-brunson-prison.html>. Accessed May 26, 2022.

## APPENDICES

### A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TRKE ZET

ABD ve Trkiye, 1952'den beri NATO mtfiki olmalarına raėmen, iki lke arasındaki iliřkiler řu anda son yetmiř yılın en ciddi kriziyle karřı karřıya bulunmaktadır. Birok farklı mesele ikili iliřkilerin bozulmasına ve kt bir gidiřatta ilerlemesine sebep olsa da bunların en gze arpanı Suriye'nin i savařına iliřkin politika farklılıklarından kaynaklanmıřtır. Bu ayrılıklar arasında en kritik olanı, Amerika Birleřik Devletleri'nin (ABD) Irak řam İřlam Devleti'ne (İřİD) karřı mcadelede Krdistan İři Partisi'nin (PKK) Suriye kolu olan Demokratik Birlik Partisi (PYD) ile ittifak yapma kararı olmuřtur. 2015 yılında resm politika hline gelen PYD ile ABD iř birliėi, iki mtfık arasında ciddi bir gvensizlik ve sregelen bir anlařmazlık yaratmıřtır. Bu tezin amacı, ABD'nin PYD'yi destekleme politikasının Trkiye ile ABD (ve buna baėlı olarak NATO) arasındaki ikili iliřkileri nasıl etkilediėini aıklamaktır. Mevcut krizin kkenlerini daha iyi anlamak iin ise ncelikle Suriye'de Trk-Amerikan ayrıřmasına yol aan tarihsel ve siyasi baėlamanın incelenmesi gerekmektedir.

George W. Bush ynetiminin, Baası Irak lideri Saddam Hseyin'in El Kaide terrizmini desteklediėi ve kitle imha silahlarını gizlediėi iddiaları da dahil olmak zere, sahte bahanelerle bařlattıėı 2003 yılındaki Irak iřgali, o zamandan beri birok siyasi analist ve uzman tarafından ABD tarihindeki en kt dıř politika kararı olarak nitelendirilmiřtir. Baas rejiminin devrilmesi, Irak'ta bařarısız bir devlet yaratmıř ve lkede ciddi bir g bořluėunun ortaya ıkmasına sebep olarak nce ABD'ye karřı isyan ve direniře, daha sonra da mezhepsel řiddete ve kanlı bir i savařa yol amıřtır. Irak'taki bařarısızlıkların Amerika'nın ekonomik istikrarı ve uluslararası itibarı zerinde olduka zararlı etkileri olmuřtur. Bu acı deneyimlerin ıřıėında, ABD

kamuoyu, denizaşırı askerî müdahalelerinin devam etmesine karşı oldukça hoşgörüsüz bir hâle gelmiştir.

Bu siyasi ve ekonomik koşullar altında Barack Obama 2009 yılında George Bush'tan başkanlık görevini devralmıştır. Yeni başkan döneminde tatbik edilmeye başlanan Obama Doktrini birçok yönden Bush döneminin çalkantılı yıllarına bir yanıt olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu yeni doktrin önceki dönemin dış politika yanlışlarını telafi etme amacı ile öne sürülmüştür. Bu doğrultuda Başkan Obama ABD'nin Orta Doğu'dan geri çekilme politikasını gündeme getirmiş. Obama yönetimi, hayatî hiçbir ABD çıkarının söz konusu olmadığı çatışmalarda ABD müttefiklerini ve ABD'nin desteklediği vekil savaşçıları söz sahibi olmaya teşvik eden bir “arkadan liderlik etme stratejisi” geliştirmiştir. Bu strateji, askerî harekâtın maliyetini düşürmek, ABD birliklerini büyük ölçüde tehlikeden uzak tutmak, askerî karışıklıklardan kaçınmak ve savaştan bıkmış bir ABD halkı tarafından yönetime yönelik olası eleştirileri önlemek maksadıyla tatbik edilmiştir.

Bununla birlikte, Mart 2011 tarihinde Suriye'de başlayan ve daha sonraki süreçte bir iç savaşa dönüşen kriz, ABD tarafından işgale uğrayan komşu Irak'ta devam eden istikrarsızlıktan büyük ölçüde etkilenmiş ve IŞİD terör örgütünün ülkenin kuzeydoğusunda endişe verici bir yükselişine sebep olmuştur. IŞİD, 2014 yılının haziran ayında Suriye ve Irak topraklarının bir bölümünü içine alan bir bölgede halifelik ilan etmiş, iki ülke toprakları üzerinde bulunan geniş bir alana yayılma fırsatı elde etmiştir. Bu kritik duruma rağmen Başkan Obama Amerikan muharebe birliklerini sahaya sürmekten özellikle kaçınmıştır. Bunun yerine Obama yönetimi IŞİD'e karşı geniş katılımlı küresel bir koalisyonun kurulmasına öncülük etmiştir. Arkadan liderlik etme stratejisine uygun olarak Obama'nın IŞİD karşıtı operasyonları, esas olarak, karadaki yerel vekil savaşçıları ABD liderliğindeki koalisyonun hava saldırıları ile desteklemek yöntemi üzerine bina edilmiştir.

IŞİD'le mücadele için kurulan uluslararası koalisyonun duyurulmasından birkaç gün sonra uluslararası kamuoyunun dikkati, IŞİD'in saldırısına uğrayan Suriyeli Kürtlerin yoğunluklu olarak yaşadığı Kobane kentine çevrilmiştir. IŞİD'in bu saldırısı ve

akabinde başlattığı kuşatma ancak dört ay süren şiddetli bir savaşın ardından püskürtülebilmektedir. Kobani’de IŞİD’e karşı YPG ile uluslararası koalisyonun birlikte verdiği mücadele ise bir dönüm noktası niteliğinde olmuş, IŞİD karşıtı koalisyon, bu ilk önemli sınavda önemli bir başarı elde etmiştir. Kobani Savaşı sayesinde ABD Özel Kuvvetleri, şehri savunan Kürt grupların – PYD ve PYD’nin silahlı kanadı olan Halk Koruma Birlikleri (YPG) – etkin askerî kabiliyeti hakkında bilgi sahibi olmuştur. 2015 yılına gelindiğinde ise YPG’nin, ABD’nin Suriye’de IŞİD’e karşı savaşan kara gücü olarak belirlenmesi resmî politika hâline gelmiştir. ABD ile YPG arasında başlatılan askerî iş birliği, Obama’nın tasarruf politikasının – düşük maliyetle askerî operasyonlar yürütmek ve ABD personelini tehlikeye atmamak – hedeflerine ulaşmada son derece etkili olmuştur. Ancak uygulanan bu politika önemli bir nedenden dolayı sorunlu bir nitelik taşımıştır. Pentagon, söz konusu bu grubun ABD Dışişleri Bakanlığı tarafından 1997 yılında yabancı terör örgütü olarak belirlenen bir örgüt olan Kürdistan İşçi Partisi (PKK) ile bağlantısını gayet iyi bilmekteydi.

PKK, ABD’nin NATO müttefiki olan Türkiye’ye karşı 35 yılı aşkın bir süredir silahlı mücadele yürütmektedir. Söz konusu bu savaş, 40.000’den fazla kişinin ölümüne neden olmuştur. Değerli bir jeostratejik konuma ve NATO’nun en büyük ikinci askerî gücüne sahip olan Türkiye, bölgede uzun zamandır hayatî bir ABD müttefiki olmuştur. Ancak Amerika’nın PYD’ye destek politikası, iki ülke arasında ciddi bir güven problemi yaratmış ve ikili ilişkilerin bozulmasına neden olmuştur. Zira Türkiye PKK’yı ve krizin patlak vermesiyle birlikte Suriye’de faaliyet göstermeye başlayan PKK ile bağlantılı YPG ve PYD adlı örgütleri kendi millî güvenliğine yönelik hayatî birer tehdit olarak algılamıştır. Bu örgütlerin ABD’nin askerî desteği ile Suriye’nin kuzeydoğusunda yer alan geniş bir alanda güç kazanmaya başlaması ise Türkiye’nin tehdit algılarını önemli ölçüde artırmıştır.

ABD Özel Harekât Komutanlığı (SOCOM), örgütün PKK ile olan bağlantıları nedeniyle IŞİD’e karşı YPG’ye silahlı destek verilmesinin sorunlu olacağının farkına varmış ve bu nedenle örgütü PKK’dan farklı kılacak yeni bir isim bulunmasını önermiştir. Bunun üzerine örgütün PKK’dan ayrı olduğu yanılması yaratmak amacıyla Suriye Demokratik Güçleri (SDG) kurulmuştur. Ayrıca YPG’nin Kürt

kimliğini sulandırmak maksadıyla örgütün saflarına Arap savaşçılar da dahil edilmiştir. Şaşırtıcı olmayan bir şekilde, Amerika'nın YPG'yi bu şekilde yeniden markalaştırma çabaları, Türkiye'nin tehdit algısını ve ABD'ye olan güvensizliğini daha da artırmıştır. ABD silahları ve Amerikan askerî danışmanlar tarafından verilen silahlı eğitimlerin de yardımıyla YPG, IŞİD'in halifelik ilan ettiği toprakları kendi özerk yönetimine (Rojava) dahil etmiş, bu da Türkiye'nin kaygı ve korkularını giderek şiddetlenmiştir. 2017 itibarıyla, YPG'nin toprak kazanımları, Fırat'ın doğusundaki tüm Türkiye-Suriye sınırı boyunca genişlemiştir. 2016 yılında YPG'nin Fırat nehrinin batısında bulunan Münbiç'i ele geçirmesiyle büyük bir kriz durumu ortaya çıkmıştır. Ankara, YPG'nin Fırat'ın batısına geçmesini kabul etmeyeceğini defalarca belirtmiş ve o bölgedeki YPG varlığı Türkiye için kırmızı bir çizgi hâline gelmiştir.

Türkiye'nin itirazları karşısında ABD, YPG'nin varlığını Fırat'ın doğusu ile sınırlı tutma ve IŞİD'e karşı mücadele kapsamında örgüte verilen ağır silahları geri alma sözü de dahil olmak üzere tutamayacağı birçok güvenlik garantisi vermiştir. Bu vaatler yerine getirilmedikçe, Türkiye'nin Suriye'nin kuzeydoğusundan gelebilecek saldırılara veya Türkiye içindeki PKK militanlarına silah transferi olasılığına ilişkin tehdit algıları daha da yükselmiştir. Ayrıca YPG'nin IŞİD'den aldığı toprakları Rojava'ya dahil etmesiyle birlikte, Türkiye'nin toprak bütünlüğü konusunda endişeler ortaya çıkmıştır. Suriye'nin kuzeydoğusunda kurulacak olası bir özerk Kürt bölgesinin gelecekte yasal olarak tanınması, Türkiye'nin kendi Kürt nüfusu arasında özerklik veya bağımsızlık taleplerini söz konusu kılacaktır. Tüm bu gelişmeler Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerini oldukça olumsuz etkilemiş, ikili ilişkilerde büyük bir kriz durumu ortaya çıkmıştır.

2016 yılına gelindiğinde, Türkiye'nin ABD'ye olan güvensizliği, Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın liderlik ettiği AKP hükûmetine 15 Temmuz 2016'da düzenlenen darbe girişiminin ardından daha da artmıştır. Başarısız darbenin ardından Türkiye, ABD'de ikamet eden din adamı Fetullah Gülen'i "darbe girişiminin beyni" olarak tanımlamıştır. Ancak Washington, Ankara'nın Gülen'i Türkiye'ye iade etme talebini reddederek, Türk devleti ve kamuoyunda Washington'un darbe girişimine karıştığına dair ciddi bir şüphe uyandırmıştır. YPG'ye verilen resmî destek

ile birleştğinde, Obama yönetimi artık Türk devletinin iki ana düşmanı olan PKK ve Gülen hareketinin bir destekçisi olarak görülmeye başlamıştır. Bu gelişmeler, Türkiye'nin ABD'nin verdiği güvenlik taahhütlerini yerine getirme kabiliyetine olan inancını yitirmesine sebep olmuştur.

Ankara'nın Washington'a olan güvensizliği iki önemli gelişmeye yol açmıştır. İlk olarak Türkiye, 2016 ve 2019 yılları arasında Suriye'nin kuzeydoğusuna YPG'yi hedef alan üç sınır ötesi askerî operasyon düzenlemiştir. 2016 yılında düzenlenen Fırat Kalkanı Harekâtı, IŞİD mevzilerini hedef almış ve dolayısıyla IŞİD karşıtı uluslararası koalisyonla fayda sağlamış olsa da esas olarak YPG'nin bitişik olmayan üç kantonunu (Afrin, Kobani ve Cezire) birbirine bağlamasını önlemeye hizmet etmiştir. Türkiye'nin açık ara en tartışmalı operasyonu olan Barış Pınarı adlı üçüncü sınır ötesi harekâtı uluslararası kamuoyu nezdinde büyük bir tepki ile karşılanmış, ABD'nin iki Türk bakanlığına ve üç üst düzey hükûmet yetkilisine yönelik yaptırımlar uygulamasına sebebiyet vermiştir. Bu gelişmeler, Türk-Amerikan ikili ilişkilerinde daha da büyük gerilimlerin ortaya çıkmasına yol açmıştır.

İkinci önemli gelişme ise başarısız darbe girişiminin ardından Türkiye'nin, Suriye'de ABD'yi dengelemek ve güvenlik hedeflerini gerçekleştirmek için Rusya ile yakınlaşmaya başlaması olmuştur. Rusya, 2015 yılında Suriye Devlet Başkanı Beşar Esad'ı desteklemek için Suriye iç savaşına müdahil olmuştur. Türkiye'nin Türkiye-Suriye sınırında seyreden bir Rus savaş uçağını düşürmesiyle başlayan ilk çatışmanın ardından, Türkiye'nin askerî operasyonlarını gerçekleştirmesi için Moskova ile ilişkilerini normalleştirmesi şarttı. Zira, Ankara'nın operasyon düzenlemek istediği bölgelerin hava sahasını Rus güçleri kontrol etmekteydi. Rusya ve Türkiye arasındaki ikili ilişkilerde yaşanan yakınlaşma, başarısız darbe girişiminin ardından, Rusya Devlet Başkanı Putin'in Erdoğan'a koşulsuz destek teklif etmesi ve ABD'nin ise darbe girişimi sonrası Türk hükûmetinin tatbik ettiği olağanüstü hâl politikalarını sert bir şekilde eleştirmesiyle başlamıştır.

Türkiye'nin Moskova ile gelişen ilişkileri, ABD ile yeni bir anlaşmazlığın daha ortaya çıkmasına neden olmuştur. Söz konusu bu anlaşmazlık, Türkiye'nin 2017'de Rus S-

400 füze savunma sistemini satın almasıyla daha da şiddetlenmiş, iki NATO müttefiki arasındaki uyuşmazlıkta yeni bir cephenin açılmasına yol açmıştır. Rus yapımı S-400 gelişmiş hava savunma sisteminin satın alınması, Türkiye ekonomisi ve savunma sanayisi için birçok olumsuz gelişmeye yol açmıştır. İlk olarak, S-400'ün satın alınması Türkiye'nin 5. nesil F-35 ortak savaş uçağı programındaki yeri konusunda soru işaretlerinin ortaya çıkmasına sebep olmuştur. Zira Amerikalı yetkililer, Rusya'nın S-400 hava savunma sistemi sayesinde Türkiye'nin ABD'den tedarik edeceği F-35 savaş uçağı hakkında kritik istihbarat bilgileri elde edeceğine dair endişelerini dile getirmişlerdir. Ankara defalarca Washington'un endişelerini gidermeye çalışmıştır. Türk hükûmeti, S-400'ün NATO sistemlerine entegre edilmeyeceğı konusunda ısrarcı olmuş, sistemin ABD veya NATO için bir tehdit oluşturmamasını sağlamak için teknik bir çalışma grubunun kurulmasını dahi önermiştir. Ancak Türkiye, ABD'li yetkilileri ikna etme konusunda başarı sağlayamamıştır. Türkiye daha sonra F-35 savaş uçağı programından çıkarılmış, milyarlarca dolarlık yatırım yaptığı 100 savaş uçağının hiçbirini ABD'den teslim alamamıştır.

Türkiye'nin Rusya'dan S-400 hava savunma sistemini satın almasının ikinci önemli sonucu, ABD'nin Hasımlarıyla Yaptırımlar Yoluyla Mücadele Etme Yasası (CAATSA) kapsamında bulunan ikincil Amerikan yaptırımlarına maruz kalması olmuştur. 14 Aralık 2020'de ABD Dışişleri Bakanlığı, Türkiye'ye karşı Türk Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı'na (SSB) verilen tüm ABD ihracat lisanslarını iptal etmenin yanı sıra SSB başkanı Dr. İsmail Demir'e yönelik varlık dondurma ve vize kısıtlamalarını da içeren bir yaptırım rejimini resmen ilan etmiştir. Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, ABD'yi yaptırımlar aracılığıyla Türkiye'nin egemenliğine açık bir saldırıda bulunmakla ve Türkiye'yi boyun eğdirmek için Türk savunma sanayisinin gelişimini kasıtlı olarak engellemeye çalışmakla suçlamıştır.

S-400 konusunda ortaya çıkan Türk-Amerikan anlaşmazlığı, bir başka önemli sonuç daha doğurmuştur: Türkiye'nin stratejik ekseninde algılanan değişim ve NATO'ya yönelik sorumluluk ve taahhütleri konusundaki tartışmaların gittikçe yoğunlaşması. Türkiye'nin S-400 alımına yönelik verilen tepki, birçok Batılı gözlemcinin AKP



hükûmeti tarafından yönetilen Türkiye'nin ABD ve NATO ile olan ilişkilerine ilişkin hâlihazırda var olan şüphesini daha da artırmıştır. Bu şüphecilik, Ankara'nın başta IŞİD karşıtı koalisyonu katılmayı reddetmesi, İran'ın nükleer programına yönelik Birleşmiş Milletler (BM) yaptırımlarına 2010 yılında karşı oy vermesi, Hamas'ı siyasi olarak desteklemesi ve İsrail'e karşı saldırgan tutum sergilemek de dahil olmak üzere çok sayıda politika farklılığından kaynaklanmıştır. Bu nedenle, Ankara'nın Rusya'dan S-400 hava savunma sistemini satın alması, birçok Batılı analist için Türkiye'nin NATO ve Batı'dan uzaklaşmasının bir başka kanıtı şeklinde algılanmıştır.

AKP'nin siyasi söylemlerine ek olarak, son yıllarda neredeyse tüm Türk siyasi partileri Batı karşıtı bir söylem geliştirmiştir. Ayrıca Selçuk Çolakoğlu'na göre, Türk dış politikası Doğu ile yakınlaşma ve Rusya ile savunma iş birliğini geliştirmeyi öngören Avrasyacılık fikrine doğru bir siyasi kayma süreci içinde bulunmaktadır. Genel olarak ifade etmek gerekirse Türkiye'deki "Batı" imajı artık "eskiden taşıdığı ahlaki, siyasi ve ekonomik ağırlığı" taşımamaktadır. Geçtiğimiz günlerde yapılan son kamuoyu yoklamaları Çolakoğlu'nun bu iddialarını açıkça desteklemektedir. MetroPoll adlı bir Türk anket şirketinin 2022 yılında gerçekleştirdiği bir ankete göre Türk vatandaşlarının yüzde 39,4'ü AB ve ABD ile, yüzde 37,5'i ise Rusya ve Çin ile uyumlu bir dış politika tercihinde bulunduklarını dile getirmiştir. ABD'nin PYD/YPG ile yaptığı askerî iş birliği ve başarısız darbe girişiminin planlayıcısı ve azmettiricisi olarak görülen Fetullah Gülen'i iade etmeyi reddetmesi, dış politikaya ilişkin söz konusu bu kamuoyu yöneliminin önemli sebeplerinden olduğu düşünülmektedir.

Türkiye'nin itibarı AKP iktidarı döneminde büyük ölçüde Erdoğan'ın popülist söylemleri nedeniyle ABD siyasi ve kamu çevreleri nezdinde zarar görmüştür. Türkiye uzmanları, bu söylemlerin Türkiye kamuoyunda ABD ve NATO'ya karşı düşmanlığı artırdığını dile getirmektedir. Ayrıca, Erdoğan'ın 2013'te yapılan Gezi Parkı protesto gösterilerini bastırması ve darbe girişimi sonrası uygulamaya koyduğu olağanüstü hâl politikaları, ABD'deki birçok kişinin, Türk siyasetinin Vladimir Putin ve Avrasya ülkelerindeki diğer liderler tarafından uygulanan liberal olmayan demokrasi tipine benzer bir otoriter yörünge izlediğini iddia etmesine yol açmıştır. Türkiye'nin YPG'ye yönelik askerî operasyonlarına ve Rus silah sistemlerini satın almasına yönelik

duyulan öfkeyle birlikte ele alındığında bu algılar, Türkiye'nin ABD'deki imajına büyük zarar vermiştir. Son yıllarda birçok Kongre üyesi Türkiye'yi Batılı olmayan ve otoriter bir ülke olarak görmeye başlamıştır.

Rahip Brunson konusundaki uzlaşmazlık ve Halkbank davası, her iki ülkenin kamuoyu ve politikacıları nezdindeki olumsuz algıları kötüleştiren iki yüksek profilli anlaşmazlık olarak kayda geçmiştir. Ekim 2016'da Türk makamları, İzmir'de yaşayan Amerikalı evangelist papaz Andrew Brunson'ı hem Gülen hareketine hem de PKK'ya destek sağladığı iddiasıyla tutuklamıştır. İzmir'de hapsedilen ve casusluk ve terör suçlarından 35 yıla kadar hapis cezası istenen Brunson'ın davası, Başkan Trump'ın ve birçoğu Brunson'ın masum olduğuna inanan ve davanın, Türkiye'nin Gülen'in ABD'den iadesini sağlama çabaları kapsamında siyasi bir 'pazarlık kozu' olarak kullanıldığını düşünen ABD'li yetkililerin öfkesini çekmiştir. Brunson'ın serbest bırakılmasını sağlamak için ekonomik baskı uygulayan Washington, gümrük vergilerini artırmanın yanı sıra Türkiye'nin adalet ve iç işleri bakanlarına da yaptırımlar uygulayarak Türk lirasının önemli ölçüde değer kaybetmesine ve ülkenin ekonomik sorunlarının daha da kötüleşmesine neden olmuştur. Ankara, ABD'ye Amerikan mallarına uyguladığı gümrük vergilerini artırmakla karşılık vermiş ve Erdoğan, Washington'u Türkiye'ye karşı bir ekonomik darbe yapmaya çalışmakla suçlamıştır. Brunson sonunda sadece 3 yıl 1 ay hapis cezasına çarptırılmış ve iki yıl tutuklu kaldıktan sonra 2018 yılının ağustos ayında serbest bırakılmıştır. Ancak söz konusu bu anlaşmazlık, Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerini oldukça olumsuz etkilemiştir.

ABD ile Türkiye arasında bir başka tartışma konusu da hâlen devam eden Halkbank davası olmuştur. Ekim 2019'da ABD Adalet Bakanlığı, bir Türk kamu bankası olan Halkbank'ın, ABD'nin İran'a karşı uyguladığı yaptırımları deldiği iddiasıyla milyarlarca dolarlık kara para aklama ve dolandırıcılık suçları ile itham edildiğini duyurmuştur. Erdoğan, yanıt olarak, söz konusu suçlamaların Türkiye'nin Barış Pınarı Harekâtı esnasında yapıldığını belirterek kararın Türkiye'nin Suriye operasyonuna karşı bir misilleme olduğunu öne sürmüştür. Halkbank davasının, her iki ülke kamuoyu ve karar alıcıları nezdinde hâlihazırda mevcut olan olumsuz algıları

kötüleştirmeye devam etmesi ve Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerinin geleceği açısından ciddi bir sorun olmayı sürdürmesi kuvvetle muhtemeldir.

ABD ve Türkiye'nin birbirleri hakkındaki algıları doğru olsun ya da olmasın, bu algılar her iki ülkenin kamuoyunu ve politikasını şekillendirmeye devam etmektedir. İkili ilişkilerin daha da kötüleşmesinin önüne geçmek için Ankara ve Washington ilişkileri sık sık bölümlere ayırmaya (compartmentalization) ve politikaların örtüştüğü alanlara odaklanmaya çalışmıştır. Ancak, Amerika'nın YPG'ye destek vermesiyle başlayan bu anlaşmazlığı çözüme kavuşturmanın oldukça zor olduğu iddia edilebilir. Zira Türk-Amerikan ilişkileri gerek kamuoyu gerek siyasi elitler düzeyinde artık neredeyse topyekûn bir düşmanlığa dönüşmüş durumdadır. Dolayısıyla Ocak 2021'de Donald Trump'ın başkanlığı sona ererken, yeni ABD Başkanı Joe Biden, önceki yönetimden derin bir krizde bulunan ve hızlı bir çözüm için çok az umut vaat eden bir ABD-Türkiye ilişkisi devralmıştır.

Biden'ın 20 Ocak 2021'de göreve başlamasıyla iki ülke ilişkilerini olumsuz etkileyen ABD'nin PYD/YPG'ye verdiği destek ve Türkiye'nin S-400 hava savunma sistemini elinde tutması gibi temel anlaşmazlık noktalarının çözüme kavuşma ihtimali daha da düşük görülmüştür. Biden, Obama döneminde Başkan Yardımcısı olarak görev yaptığı süre boyunca ve başkanlık kampanyası sırasında, Erdoğan liderliğindeki AKP hükûmetinin politikalarına karşı sürekli olarak eleştirel bir duruş sergilemiştir. Biden, Erdoğan'a yönelik en sert açıklamalarını ise başkan adaylığı sırasında New York Times gazetesine verdiği bir röportajda yapmıştır. Bu röportajda Biden Erdoğan'ı otokrat bir lider olmakla suçlamış, hükûmetin Kürtlere yönelik uygulanan politikalarını eleştirmiş ve Erdoğan'a karşı olan Türk muhalefetini önümüzdeki dönemde yapılacak seçimlerde cesaretlendirme taahhüdünde bulunmuştur. Bu röportaj daha sonra Türkiye'de gündeme gelmiş ve hem AKP hem de ana muhalefetteki CHP yetkililerini aynı şekilde öfkelenmiştir. Bu hadise, Biden'ın başkanlığı döneminde Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerinin karşı karşıya kalacağı zorlu süreci gözler önüne sermek açısından önem arz etmektedir.

Ankara’da, Biden ile Biden yönetiminin bünyesinde vazife alan siyasiler ve bürokratların geçmişteki Kürt yanlısı tutumları konusunda da birtakım endişeler ortaya çıkmıştır. Biden yönetiminde Savunma Bakanı olarak göreve başlayan Lloyd Austin, ABD Merkez Komutanlığı’nın (CENTCOM) IŞİD’le mücadele kapsamında ABD’nin YPG ile askerî iş birliği yapmasına karar vermesinde önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Eski CENTCOM komutanı da olan Austin ayrıca YPG’nin IŞİD’e karşı verilen mücadeledeki rolüne ciddi bir önem atfetmektedir. Ancak Ankara’yı belki de en çok kaygılandıran husus, Biden’ın Ulusal Güvenlik Konseyi’nin Ortadoğu ve Kuzey Afrika koordinatörü olarak Brett McGurk’u atamaya karar vermesidir. McGurk uzun zamandır Erdoğan’ın Suriye politikalarını açık ve sert bir biçimde eleştirmektedir. Dahası McGurk, Biden yönetimi bünyesinde Suriye’nin kuzeydoğusundaki Kürtlerle en güçlü bağlara sahip olan diplomat olarak bilinmektedir. YPG ile Biden yönetimi bünyesindeki üst düzey bürokratlar arasındaki bağlantılar göz önüne alındığında ve Biden’ın IŞİD’in yeniden canlanmasını önlemek üzere örgüte verilen desteği sürdürme taahhütleri düşünüldüğünde, YPG konusundaki Türk-Amerikan anlaşmazlığının devam etmesi ve yakın gelecekte iki ülke arasındaki temel uyuşmazlık noktası olmayı sürdürmesi kuvvetle muhtemeldir.

PYD/YPG konusundaki süregelen görüş ayrılığına ek olarak, Türkiye’nin S-400 Rus hava savunma sistemini elinde tutması hususundaki Türk-Amerikan anlaşmazlığı, iki ülke arasındaki ilişkileri zora sokan dinamiklerden bir tanesidir. Dahası Erdoğan, Rusya’dan ikinci bir S-400 paketinin satın alınma ihtimalini gündeme getirmiş, bunun yanı sıra Türkiye’nin gelişmiş teknolojiye sahip Rus savaş uçakları ile de ilgilenmekte olduğunu ifade etmiştir. Şayet bu alımlar gerçekleşirse hiç kuşkusuz ABD’nin Türkiye’ye uyguladığı yaptırımlar daha da sertleştirecektir. 2021 yılının sonlarına doğru Ankara ve Moskova, teknoloji transferi ve S-400 sisteminin ortak üretimi konusunda iş birliği yapma kararı almış ve iki ülke arasındaki savunma bağlarını daha da güçlendirme yönünde irade beyanında bulunmuştur. Bu ve benzeri birtakım gelişmeler, S-400 sorununa kısa vadede bir çözüm bulunmasını engelliyor gibi gözükmektedir.

Ancak tüm bu korkunç ve endişe verici gelişmelere rağmen, Türk-Amerikan ilişkilerinin büyük krizlerin üstesinden gelme konusunda uzun bir geçmişi bulunmaktadır. Rusya'nın Şubat 2022 tarihinde Ukrayna'yı işgal etmesinin iki ülke arasındaki gergin ilişkileri bir nebze olsun rahatlatması ve iki ülkenin yeniden yakınlaşmasını sağlaması ihtimal dahilinde bulunmaktadır. Ukrayna Savaşı ve akabinde ortaya çıkan güvenlik krizi, Türkiye'nin NATO bünyesindeki merkezî pozisyonunun tüm NATO üyelerince tekrardan hatırlanmasına vesile olmuştur. Ankara, oldukça kritik bir hamle ile Montrö Sözleşmesi kapsamındaki yetkilerini kullanarak Rus savaş gemilerinin Türk boğazlarından Karadeniz'e geçişini kısıtlama kararı almış ve böylece krizin tırmanmasını önlemeye yardımcı olmuştur. Ayrıca son yıllarda hem Rusya ile hem de Ukrayna ile iyi ilişkiler geliştiren Türkiye, Moskova ve Kiev arasında diplomatik görüşmelere ev sahipliği yaparak söz konusu ihtilafa bir çözüm bulma çabalarına öncülük etmiştir. Hatta bu çabalar, Erdoğan ile yaptığı telefon görüşmesinde Türkiye'nin yürüttüğü barış diplomasisinden duyduğu memnuniyeti dile getiren ve iki ülkenin Ukrayna'ya ortak desteğini yineleyen Joe Biden tarafından dahi övgü almıştır. Rusya ve Ukrayna arasındaki savaş tüm hızıyla devam ederken, Ukrayna'ya destek olma konusunda sağlanan yakınlaşma, uzun süredir olumsuz seyreden ABD-Türkiye ilişkileri için bir can simidi vazifesi görebilir.

## B. THESIS PERMISSION FORM / TEZ İZİN FORMU

(Please fill out this form on computer. Double click on the boxes to fill them)

### ENSTİTÜ / INSTITUTE

- Fen Bilimleri Enstitüsü / Graduate School of Natural and Applied Sciences** ☐
- Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü / Graduate School of Social Sciences** ☒
- Uygulamalı Matematik Enstitüsü / Graduate School of Applied Mathematics** ☐
- Enformatik Enstitüsü / Graduate School of Informatics** ☐
- Deniz Bilimleri Enstitüsü / Graduate School of Marine Sciences** ☐

### YAZARIN / AUTHOR

**Soyadı / Surname** : Meoni  
**Adı / Name** : Brandi  
**Bölümü / Department** : Orta Doğu Araştırmaları / Middle East Studies

**TEZİN ADI / TITLE OF THE THESIS** (İngilizce / English): Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces:

**TEZİN TÜRÜ / DEGREE:** Yüksek Lisans / Master ☒ Doktora / PhD ☐

1. **Tezin tamamı dünya çapında erişime açılacaktır. / Release the entire work immediately for access worldwide.** ☒
2. **Tez iki yıl süreyle erişime kapalı olacaktır. / Secure the entire work for patent and/or proprietary purposes for a period of two years. \*** ☐
3. **Tez altı ay süreyle erişime kapalı olacaktır. / Secure the entire work for period of six months. \*** ☐

*\* Enstitü Yönetim Kurulu kararının basılı kopyası tezle birlikte kütüphaneye teslim edilecektir. / A copy of the decision of the Institute Administrative Committee will be delivered to the library together with the printed thesis.*

**Yazarın imzası / Signature** .....

**Tarih / Date** .....

(Kütüphaneye teslim ettiğiniz tarih. Elle doldurulacaktır.)  
(Library submission date. Please fill out by hand.)

*Tezin son sayfasıdır. / This is the last page of the thesis/dissertation.*