



Focusing on a Positive Future for U.S.–Turkey Relations

By Ilter Turan

The highly contentious relationship that has evolved between Turkey and the United States over their different approaches to the situation in Syria has led to serious questions as to whether the partnership can survive. While the points of disagreement between Turkey and the United States are real and important, this should not lead us to overlook the comprehensive relationship with historical common interests.

The close cooperation of the United States with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria has cast a dark shadow on the U.S.–Turkey partnership that was developed after the World War II. Although their “strategic partnership” ran into some difficulties during the Cold War, and even more so after the end of the bipolar world, it has never reached the level it is at now. Recently, references have been made to the possibility of an encounter between American and Turkish forces in Manbij, an enclave on the west side of the Euphrates with a concentration of YPG units that are presumably part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) engaged in fighting the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The story needs no repeating: Turkey argues that the PYD/YPG is a Syrian extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — a defined terrorist organization by both Turkey and the United States. The PKK continues to challenge the territorial integrity of Turkey, and the arms and training that the United States provides to the YPG are transferable to the PKK. Turkey argues that the emergence of the PYD as an organization

with a territory of its own, would pose a threat its territorial integrity in the future. Though the PKK is designated a terrorist organization, the United States does not consider the YPG in the same light. The U.S. response is that its cooperation with the YPG is transactional in nature and will be terminated after ISIS is defeated whereupon arms given to it will be taken back.

This current situation has become so consuming that both countries are blinded to the reality that they continue to have significant common interests. Unfortunately, the proclivity to overlook the commonalities is exacerbated by several factors. First, the actions of both governments are shaped almost exclusively by domestic concerns. The Trump administration is enamored with “Making America Great Again,” while the Erdogan administration is obsessed with restoring the “Glory of the Lost Empire.” In both countries, the old political class is held responsible for having led the country into blind alleys. This rhetoric is intended almost entirely for domestic audiences while its effects in the outside world — including countries with whom you may have a contentious relationship — are hardly considered. Nevertheless, words uttered for local consumption are heard everywhere, people react to them, governments come under pressure to respond.

Second, both the general and the attentive publics of the two countries are mobilized against each other by some political leaders, parts of the political establishment, parts of civil society, and media. The



results are not encouraging. For example, a poll sponsored by The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) implemented in November–December 2017, 54.3 percent of Turks identified the United States as the greatest security threat to Turkey, far ahead of any other country. Although a similar poll is lacking and would be less meaningful in the United States, Turkey bashing is not uncommon among members of Congress and some parts of the U.S. administration. This is in addition to some ethnic lobbies that have historically pursued an anti-Turkish stand.

Third, each country appears to be not sufficiently sensitive to the concerns of the other. To return to the findings of the GMF supported poll, among Turks three of the five developments that aroused the greatest concerns for the future are terror (89 percent), going into war with neighboring countries (84.5 percent), and the partitioning of the country (82.0 percent), all connected in one way or another to the PKK and the PYD/YPG. Most Turks feel that the United States pays absolutely no attention to Turkey's concerns about the separatist terror that is being implemented by the PKK and its Syrian branch PYD/YPG. Many then begin to suspect that the United States may itself be interested in the dismemberment of Turkey. Many Americans, on the other hand, are concerned that ISIS will build a house of terror in the Middle East if it goes unchecked, giving it the ability to intensify its activities abroad. Their overriding concern with ISIS, they believe, justifies their cooperation with any partner that can help them defeat it. From an American perspective, Turkey's priority to fight the PKK undermines the campaign against ISIS. In the end, some Americans express worries that Turkey may be extending assistance to ISIS to counterbalance the power of the YPG/PYD. Mutual fears and misperceptions may only be repelled by close cooperation and extensive communication between the two governments.

Amid the unfavorable foreign policy environment in both societies, it becomes all the more important to take a stock of common interests. Focusing exclusively on one area and the associated issues of contention may inflict irreparable harm to a relationship that is overall beneficial — a long-term loss that exceeds the

ostensible losses incurred in this particular problem area. To begin with, Turkey's trade with the United States has started to expand substantially during the recent years. Faced with a current account deficit and searching for opportunities to expand its exports, Turkey has a stake in maintaining a healthy economic relationship with the United States. Similarly, U.S. exports to Turkey are important. Of particular relevance are passenger planes, military aircraft and other military assets, among others. A critical problem that constitutes not only an impediment to trade but produces political and strategic outcomes is the tendency of U.S. Congress to put restrictions on arms sales to Turkey. While restricting arms sales may impose some difficulties on Turkey in the short run, it generates some problematic outcomes in the long run. Turkey copes with such deprivation in two ways: It tries to develop its own weapons systems and it tries to procure arms from other suppliers. If the other supplier is a NATO country, then the problem may be minimal. But, if the supplier is a non-NATO or a counter-NATO country like Russia, this creates an Alliance wide problem of weapons compatibility and therefore partner reliability, reflecting on the overall capabilities and interoperability of the Alliance.

Historically, the complex Turkish–American relationship has been driven by common security interests. The right question to ask would then be whether there is significant common security interests between the two countries that continue to prevail even though the world system has undergone a significant transformation since the time that the initial security partnership was forged. The basis of security cooperation between the two countries was in the past based on the perception of a threat of Soviet expansionism. The Warsaw Pact is now defunct and many of its members have become a part of the European Union. The Soviet Union is gone. Does the Russian Federation constitute a major security concern for the Western Alliance? The answer may only be offered in a somewhat enigmatic form: The less we perceive Russia as a threat and act accordingly, the more real the threat becomes. To elaborate, states form their goals according to their capabilities and their judgments in regard to how other actors in the international system will react to their actions. Russia

has very modest soft power (economy, ideology, model society, way of life, etc.) but significant hard power capabilities (military). It has demonstrated a clear willingness to use its hard power when assured that it can do so without significant reaction from other powers, as was clearly observed in the case of Georgia and Crimea. It is no secret that it is trying to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean and achieving reasonable success. Turkey and many members of the European Union have developed active economic relationships with Russia. This can seem highly desirable because it leads to the development of common stakes such that the Russians would also experience deprivations if they allow their relations with NATO members deteriorate. But, it is equally important for the Russians to calculate that if they use their hard power to affect changes in the security environment, they may encounter similar responses. In this context, Turkey and the United States continue to share a common interest. Turkey needs the U.S.-led Alliance to balance the hard power Russia possesses — and the United States needs Turkey's cooperation to ensure Russian challenges are monitored and met in regions within the proximity of Russia. The fact that they are partners in an integrated defense system only enhances their power. A similar argument can be made with regard to Iran, where the two countries hold a common interest in insuring that Iran does not develop immediately deployable nuclear capabilities or project its power toward the Mediterranean directly or by using proxies.

However imperfect their current practices may be, both societies are committed to free market economies and competitively elected governments, which has constituted the basis of their past relationship — and on which they should want to preserve their relationship in the future. One disagreement, however strong it may be, should not be allowed to destroy it.

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About the Author

Dr. İlder Turan is emeritus professor of political science at Istanbul Bilgi University and the president of the International Political Science Association (IPSA). He served as the president of Istanbul Bilgi University from 1998 to 2001.

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>