



United States and Turkey: A Vulnerable Relationship

By Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı

ANKARA — The U.S.–Turkey relationship has always been difficult, but never so vulnerable. Diverging priorities and, it is time to say, contravening strategies in Syria have brought the two allies to the breaking point. The core of the disagreement has been the difference between the American and Turkish perceptions of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed branch the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The United States considers PYD as the only capable partner to work by, with, and through on the ground in Syria against the self-proclaimed Islamic State and continues to provide support including in terms of arms and training to the YPG, with the expectation that they will be used against ISIL. Turkey, on the other hand, considers the PYD as the Syrian off-shoot of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), which is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, and a PYD controlled area on its southern borders as a major national security threat.

Turkey’s offensive in Afrin has revealed just how vulnerable the U.S.–Turkey relationship has become. While there is no U.S. presence in Afrin, there are U.S. forces in Manbij and YPG held territories east of the Euphrates River creating a risk of engagement between Turkish and American forces in the case of Turkish offensives against YPG in those areas. Turkish

President Tayyip Erdoğan told U.S. President Donald Trump in a phone call on January 25 that “U.S. troops should withdraw from northern Syria’s Manbij region,”¹ and General Joseph Votel, commander of the United States Central Command, said “withdrawing U.S. forces from Manbij is not something the United States is looking into.”² While the United States is looking for other ways to appease Turkey, the only thing that will satisfy Turkey is for the United States to totally end its support to YPG, “yesterday.”

It has been argued, also by this author, that U.S. cooperation with YPG is a tactical decision taken at the operational level and not part of a broader strategic vision. However, this may be changing now. The 2018 National Defense Strategy recently unveiled by Secretary Mattis indicates that the United States will “develop enduring coalitions to consolidate gains we have made in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, to support the lasting defeat of terrorists as we sever their sources of strength and counterbalance Iran.”³ An announcement made by Colonel Thomas F. Veale,

1 “Turkey’s Erdogan Told Trump U.S. Should Withdraw from Syria’s Manbij: Minister,” Reuters, January 25, 2018.

2 Euan McKirdy, “U.S. General: U.S. Troops Won’t Withdraw from Syrian City of Manbij,” CNN Politics, January 29, 2018.

3 U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Security Defense of the United States of America.”

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public affairs officer for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS that “the Coalition is working jointly with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to establish and train the new Syrian Border Security Force with the goal of a final force size of approximately 30,000”⁴ appears to be pretty much in line with the strategy of developing enduring coalitions indicated in the National Defense Strategy. There is a difference between a limited and temporary cooperation with YPG and developing an enduring coalition with it. While the former was also a nuisance, the latter can take the United States and Turkey on a collision course. Turkish President Erdoğan has already come out very strongly against such a plan in a tweet, saying “The U.S. has now acknowledged that it has established a terror army along our borders. Our duty, in return, is to nip this terror army in the bud.”⁵

The U.S.–Turkey alliance can no longer be taken for granted. That this relationship has endured several “stress tests” in the past is no guarantee that it will endure this one. What has changed? First, there is no longer a strategic framework for the relationship. Second, there are no longer owners of the relationship on either side. Third, in an age of populism, anti-Americanism in Turkey and the growing dislike of Turkey’s leadership in the United States matter a lot. Last but not the least, Washington seems to have lost its strategic thinking ability and Turkey is in a regime survival mode, which means that long-term interests are irrelevant for either side.

Breaking this relationship would have sustained consequences for both the United States and Turkey, as it would be highly difficult to for either side to find a substitute. The United States does not have any other partner in Turkey’s neighborhood with the same capacity — and the PYD can certainly not grow into one. While Turkey likes to have alternatives, Russia can never be a substitute for the United States as Russia has neither the capacity for nor an interest in such a role. As a matter of fact, Turkey and Russia have

conflicting positions on most foreign policy issues, from the Balkans and the Caucasus to the Middle East and Central Asia.

It is very unlikely for the United States and Turkey to come to an agreement regarding their strategies in Syria in the short run. However, statements, policies, and actions today could diminish the chances of putting the relationship back on track even on the long run. A few steps should be taken to survive the current crisis. First, both allies should agree to disagree in Syria and not consider this as a reason to break the relationship. Second, state officials at all levels on both sides should avoid emotional and provocative statements. Third, diplomats and military on both sides should silently work together to avoid an unexpected collision in Syria in the short run and develop a new strategic framework for the cooperation in the longer run. Finally, those who care for the relationship in both countries should finally stand up against those who advocate for breaking the relationship.

⁴ Joanne Stocker, “Coalition Retraining 15,000 Veteran SDF Fighters to Serve as Syrian Border Force,” *The Defense Post*, January 13, 2018.

⁵ Eric Schmitt, “Turkey’s President Assails U.S.–Trained Kurdish Border Force,” *January 15, 2018*.

Transatlantic Take

About the Author

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