



The U.S.-Turkey Partnership

One Step Forward, Three Steps Back

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President Barack Obama made a large political investment in Turkey in 2009 for a series of compelling reasons, which he laid out in a speech to the Turkish parliament during his first overseas trip as president.¹ His administration recognized that Turkey's role would be essential to tackling a series of challenges important to the United States, including stabilizing Iraq, solidifying a sanctions regime to pressure Iran to negotiate on its nuclear ambitions, and combating terrorism.

Through this investment, President Obama sought to strengthen the three pillars of the U.S.-Turkey partnership that were referenced in his Ankara speech:² Turkey's status as a "strong, vibrant, secular democracy" and its commitment to the rule of law; Turkey's important role in the NATO alliance and its push for membership in the European Union, both of which bind it firmly to the West; and Turkey's potential to serve as an interlocutor and a model to the Middle East and the broader Muslim world as part of President Obama's efforts to patch up America's image in the Muslim world.

But this investment has not been reciprocated. The ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have handled domestic and regional developments in a way that has raised doubts about each of these pillars. Few observers would count Turkey as a vibrant democracy. Turkey's bid for EU membership has stalled, and its role as a reliable NATO ally has been questioned. Moreover, the country's appeal as a model for the region has eroded significantly,³ and its ability to influence regional dynamics has decreased as Syria and Iraq have spun out of control.

There are many reasons for the deterioration on each of these fronts—including domestic political pressures on the AKP, the ideological positions of its leadership and the political constituencies on which it relies, and remarkable regional upheaval—but the end result is that Turkey has distanced itself from the West and from Western values.

The bottom line is that the United States' investment in Erdoğan and the AKP has not worked, and the United States should try a new approach. The Turkish government seems determined to crack down on dissent. It has signed energy and defense accords

with Russia and China that undermine NATO positions, and it routinely bargains with the United States over what should be basic transactions between allies in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.⁴ Additionally, the AKP leadership has repeatedly resorted to rhetorical attacks on the United States, the European Union, and Israel, which only increase latent anti-Americanism in Turkish society. It is time for the United States to try a new policy and to bring its considerable leverage to bear. The United States should let the AKP enjoy what pro-government voices have called the country's "precious loneliness."⁵

Early optimism for a new partnership

According to a famous Kemalist mantra, "Turkey is a country surrounded by seas on three sides, and by enemies on four sides."⁶ This perception informed generations of Turkish students and policymakers, reflecting the limits placed on Turkish political vision by the Cold War era. More than any other country in the Western alliance, Turkey was frozen into a geopolitical box by a bipolar world. For much of the 20th century, the country was surrounded by members of the Soviet-allied Warsaw Pact, authoritarian regimes of Baathist or Islamist orientation, or nations with which it had deep historical animosities, such as Greece.

This siege mentality began to soften in the 1990s and underwent a more thorough change with the electoral victory of the conservative AKP in 2002. Then-Prime Minister Erdoğan declared in September 2008 that this "Turkish complex ... is behind us" after President Abdullah Gül concluded a historic visit to long-estranged Armenia.⁷ These shifts—both real and rhetorical—were part of an important attempt to overcome the widespread Turkish misconception that other nations were trying to hold the country down. Later, in 2009 and 2010, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with our neighbors"⁸ policy built upon this premise, aiming to turn old enemies into friends and becoming the catchphrase of Turkish diplomacy. Davutoğlu's approach, outlined during the years he spent in an advisory role before assuming the position of foreign minister, sought to reinvigorate Turkey's bid for EU membership, normalize relations with Syria and Armenia, take steps to resolve the Cyprus dispute, and boost trade ties with the Middle East and Africa.⁹ While this approach was perhaps deterministic—relying on Turkey's geography as something of a crutch to ensure and explain its relevance—it was an important step forward.

This new outlook prompted great optimism among Western observers and friends of Turkey, who hoped that it would render obsolete the stubborn Turkish conspiracy theories that saw Western imperialism behind every regional dynamic. The new approach seemed to offer a modern, rational position—albeit one defined within a conservative perspective and with universalist ingredients—that sought engagement with the Levant alongside a push for membership in the European Union.

The “Kurdish opening”¹⁰ in 2009 was the domestic counterpart to this policy. It was a genuine attempt to demilitarize Turkish politics and society and to end a conflict that had left tens of thousands of people dead over the previous three decades, most of them Kurdish citizens of Turkey.¹¹ Implicitly, the outreach and rhetorical shift around the opening began to reverse the vague and archaic preamble of the Turkish Constitution, which categorically prohibits “activity contrary to ... [the] historical and moral values of Turkishness.”¹² For example, state-run television and radio stations began to broadcast extended Kurdish-language programming—something that was unthinkable for years in Turkey. Explicitly, the opening was an acknowledgment of the country’s diversity and a shift away from its ethnic definition of citizenship.

Based on these advances and as part of his effort to recast U.S. relations with the region in the wake of the Bush administration, as mentioned above, President Obama visited Ankara during his first overseas trip in 2009—a presidential first and a demonstration of the importance he placed on the relationship. In his speech before the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, President Obama emphasized, “Turkey’s democracy is your own achievement. It was not forced upon you by any outside power.” He also stressed the need for cooperation between the United States and Turkey.¹³

The Ankara speech inaugurated five years of serious investment of political capital in Turkey by the Obama administration. This investment continued despite increasingly discordant signals from the Turkish side, where Prime Minister—now President—Erdoğan often succumbed to the temptation to use the United States as a populist punching bag in his domestic politics.¹⁴ But the investment was the right move at the time. The United States sought to elevate its relationship with Turkey above the countless day-to-day transactions between the two governments. By doing this, it hoped to create a durable partnership that would increase Turkish domestic legitimacy through democratic reforms; contribute to regional stability through Turkish economic and political engagement with the Levant; and help shape increasingly turbulent regional transformations in a democratic, pluralistic way.

However, the past two years have made it painfully obvious that these expectations are unrealistic. Perhaps the U.S.-Turkey partnership is yet another victim of the unprecedented upheaval sweeping the region, but it is clear that the relationship has reached and passed an important turning point. Far from moving beyond the transactional, U.S.-Turkish interactions are now testy, hard-bargaining affairs. The U.S. policy of political investment has not paid off with Turkey—or at least not with its current government. Now—as Ömer Taşpınar, an expert on Turkey and a professor at the National War College, has suggested—is the time to try a policy of “benign neglect” and let the government in Ankara decide if it is prepared to engage in reciprocity.¹⁵

Moments of transformation

Three moments capture the trajectory of this transformation in the U.S.-Turkey relationship and define the limits of Turkish capability and influence. These moments are tied to three famous sites in three troubled countries: Gezi Park in Turkey; Mosul in Iraq; and Kobani in Syria.

Gezi Park

In May 2013, a small protest movement to save a city park in Istanbul became an illustration of Turkish society's transformation and the Turkish government's inability to respond with political flexibility. The park was seized upon as a symbol by Turkey's diverse, urban middle class, which was chafing under the assertion of political and cultural dominance by the previously marginalized Islamist working class—a current that took political form in the AKP. The protests also showed the world a detached, vindictive government that mismanaged a legitimate protest and escalated the confrontation into a month-long street fight that left five people dead, more than 8,000 people injured,¹⁶ and substantially deepened polarization within Turkish society.

From a U.S. perspective, the lack of political responsiveness and restraint from the AKP crystallized long-term concerns about the deterioration of press freedom, soft and hard censorship, government suppression of social media, new surveillance laws, and frequent interference in the judicial process through the reassignment of police and prosecutors.¹⁷ Over the course of the events at Gezi and around the country, and in their aftermath, the Turkish government pivoted decisively away from efforts to establish greater legitimacy through democratic reforms, thus weakening an important pillar of the U.S.-Turkish partnership.

Mosul

On June 11, 2014, one year after the protests in Gezi Park, ISIS militants overran the Iraqi city of Mosul, taking Turkish Consul General Öztürk Yılmaz and 49 other Turks hostage.¹⁸ This disaster was the result of a chain of events that underlined Turkey's lack of strategic foresight and limited tactical capabilities, shaking the second pillar of Turkey's cooperation with the United States: positive regional engagement.

On June 6, when it became clear that ISIS was about to take over the city, Mosul Governor Atheel al-Nujaifi began making emergency calls to regional political leaders to warn of the impending dangers.¹⁹ Despite these calls, then-Foreign Minister Davutoğlu declared on June 10 that there was no threat to Turkey's consul general or his staff.²⁰ One day later, contrary to Davutoğlu's statements, ISIS took Yılmaz and his colleagues hostage.

However, it was the Turkish government's reaction to the kidnapping that was most telling. Instead of reviewing what went wrong to ensure that it would not occur again—as the United States did after Benghazi—on June 15, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan asked the Turkish media not to report on the incident. The next day, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç echoed Erdoğan's call, and a court in Ankara “issued ... a gag order ruling that ‘all kinds of print, visual and Internet media are banned from writing and commenting on the situation’” in Mosul.²¹ On June 17, the Supreme Board of Radio and Television, or RTÜK, delivered the decision of the 9th Heavy Penal Court²² to all media executives, giving the ban legal effect. Meanwhile, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs insisted that those taken by ISIS were “not hostages” but rather “Turkish citizens taken to an unknown location.”²³

The Turkish government had become so focused on overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that they were unable to anticipate the malignant spread of ISIS or to comprehend that the group might target Turkish citizens. This is not the sort of regional engagement the United States sought when it invested anew in the Turkish partnership in 2009.

Kobani

The most telling turning point in the U.S.-Turkish relationship was the disagreement over Kobani, a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria along the Turkish border. Beginning in summer 2014 under the eyes of the international media, control of the town became a major goal for both ISIS and the coalition arrayed against it. This political importance led to a desperate struggle between the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG, that were defending the city and waves of better-equipped ISIS fighters. Kobani—despite the efforts of Turkish officials to downplay the town's importance—become a symbol of resistance against ISIS and a test case for whether the U.S.-led coalition's aerial strategy in support of indigenous ground forces could hold off a concerted ISIS attack.

However, the Turkish government was deeply reluctant to help secure this important military and propaganda victory for the anti-ISIS coalition. Indeed, Turkey seemed more concerned with undermining Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria than with confronting the threat from ISIS. When the United States pressured Turkey to help the Kurds, President Erdoğan used the negotiations to try to extract concessions from the United States on other aspects of Syria policy—primarily the targeting of the Assad regime. Of course, the Turkish government did accept and care for the tens of thousands of refugees who fled Kobani in the wake of the ISIS attack and deserves credit for its hospitality. But these people likely would not have had to flee Kobani if the Turkish government had allowed supplies to reach the Kurdish defenders instead of blocking resupply in the early stages of the ISIS attack, effectively completing the ISIS siege.

While few serious observers expected or wanted Turkey to intervene militarily in Syria without international backing, the Turkish role in completing the siege of Kobani—along with anti-Kurdish rhetoric from Turkish leaders—led to the perception that the AKP was more interested in the destruction of a quasi-autonomous Kurdish region along Turkey’s southern border than in preventing a humanitarian catastrophe or cooperating with its NATO partners and the international coalition in the fight against ISIS.

This policy of blocking supplies to Kobani led to widespread Kurdish protests in major Turkish cities on October 6 and 7 that left up to 37 citizens dead, mostly in clashes between Kurdish sympathizers and Islamist factions.²⁴ The intense reaction elicited by the fighting in Kobani demonstrated that the peace process between Ankara and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK—a militant armed group that has waged an intermittent war against the Turkish state—is now driven as much by regional events as by the situation inside Turkey, which is an important development. However, Ankara has been slow to recognize the reality of a new, more interconnected, regional Kurdish body politic. It is another indication of the Turkish government’s inability to anticipate or react to shifting regional dynamics.

The AKP seeks to keep the Kurdish question a domestic issue, refusing to acknowledge the development of a public sphere and political discourse shared by Kurds inside and outside Turkey. The AKP’s reluctant and belated support for the transit of a small detachment of Kurdish Peshmerga—the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan—from northern Iraq to Kobani was its first concession to the reality that the borders between northern Iraq, Turkey, and Syria have become less relevant. It is unlikely to be the last such policy adjustment forced on Turkey.

While Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan recently contended that “Syrian Kurds are our natural ally,”²⁵ many in his party disagree. This leaves the AKP pursuing contradictory policy goals: seeking to undermine Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria while trying to keep the domestic peace negotiations with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan on track. This ambiguity has damaged the peace process in Turkey and has made it impossible for the government to function as a regional mediator—the role the United States would favor for its ally—in the near future.

In addition, the AKP’s handling of Kobani raises questions about the current government’s ability to adequately assess regional transformations and devise reliable policy responses. The U.S. decision to airdrop ammunition and humanitarian aid into Kobani on October 19 was a remarkable departure from past U.S. deference to Turkish wishes on Kurdish issues.²⁶ The White House ordered a major shift in the U.S. approach to events along the Turkish border against Turkey’s wishes and only informed President Erdoğan one day in advance, after the decision had been made.²⁷ This action was not taken lightly and was the culmination of months of growing frustration about Turkey’s incessant bargaining over its participation in the anti-ISIS coalition. American policymakers were well aware

of Turkey's concerns about the objectives and character of the Democratic Union Party, or PYD—a Syrian Kurdish political party. They were equally cognizant of the AKP's desire to broaden the international campaign against ISIS to include the targeting of Syrian President Assad.²⁸ However, for a NATO ally to tie cooperation of almost any kind to fulfillment of all of its demands—demands that would have resulted in U.S. ownership of another war in the Middle East—seemed unreasonable to American policymakers. White House frustration about Turkey's approach and President Erdoğan's constant public sniping and populist demagoguery provide some context for the military and strategic decision to save Kobani.

The future of the U.S.-Turkey partnership

After years of U.S. political investment in the Turkish partnership, the two nations' differences have become impossible to ignore. Close cooperation with the United States has helped bolster Erdoğan in his roles as prime minister and president, but the United States has not gotten much in return. In fact, this investment has often been met with insults or conspiracy theories—for example, Erdoğan's absurd statement implying that U.S. Ambassador Francis Ricciardone was “engaging in some provocative actions” in Turkey or AKP member and Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek's comment, referring to the United States, that “These barons and neocons have decided to redesign Turkey to govern it.”²⁹ The rhetoric from Turkey's leaders has gone back to the bad old days but is now accompanied by strategic dissonance and impotence rather than cooperation.

This is not to say that Turkey must blindly follow America's lead on Syria or anything else. But differences in approach do not excuse cynical bargaining for advantage—at least not between allies. Just as importantly, the United States is not responsible for Turkey's problems, and many in the U.S. administration seem tired of being blamed for them. Turkey is an advanced country and should give up hiding behind the trope of American imperialist meddling.

Finally, the AKP has demonstrated a vindictive, authoritarian streak and a lack of political acumen that combine to make it a less-than-valuable partner. For a relationship of marginal value, the United States is sure putting up with a lot. Behlül Özkan, an assistant professor at Marmara University and the author of *From the Abode of Islam to the Turkish Vatan: The Making of a National Homeland in Turkey*, described the AKP's reluctance to accept criticism as a structural problem within the party: “More worrying than Davutoğlu's failures as a policymaker,” he wrote in 2014, “is the fact that he does not see his critics as legitimate. Both he and his supporters believe him to be infallible.”^{30*}

The same is true for President Erdoğan, who has jettisoned his earlier efforts at reform and broader political inclusion to focus on divisive identity politics and a fifty-percent-plus-one approach to consolidate control. He made this trend clear in the nomination

speech that opened his presidential campaign in July. The speech was saturated with religious metaphors and half-baked claims to both Islamic and anti-colonial traditions. “For 200 years,” Erdoğan said, “they tried to tear us away from our history and from our ancestors. They tried to get us to disown our claim.”³¹ He seemed to suggest that his presidency would restore a vague, glorious Turkish state—but one predicated against Western meddling. In Erdoğan’s telling, then, Turkey is once again threatened by enemies from outside and within—a far cry from the hopes of the early AKP years. But beyond their dubious historical legitimacy, such ideological delusions are causing significant damage to Turkey’s foreign policy interests and its relations with the United States.

Today, due in part to the AKP’s authoritarian and anti-Western shift, Turkey is more isolated and less able to shape regional policy than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Offers of cooperation from the United States and the European Union are now more often dismissed than accepted. One of the important lessons from the turning points that have shaped the past two years is that Turkey’s geography is both an asset and a liability. Geography can ensure relevance, but genuine influence should be built upon reliable capabilities, a strong understanding of regional shifts, and policies driven by national interest and democratic convictions rather than religious paradigms.

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*** Correction, March 12, 2015:** *This brief incorrectly identified Behlül Özkan. He is an assistant professor at Marmara University and the author of From the Abode of Islam to the Turkish Vatan: The Making of a National Homeland in Turkey.*

Endnotes

- 1 The White House, "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament," Press release, April 6, 2009, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament.
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- 9 Davutoğlu's "zero problems" approach has been discussed many times, but he recently described and defended it here: Ahmet Davutoglu, "Zero Problems in a New Era," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2013, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/21/zero-problems-in-a-new-era/>.
- 10 See, for example, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The Kurdish Opening in Turkey: Origins and Future?," December 1, 2009, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/12/01/kurdish-opening-in-turkey-origins-and-future/2ndb>.
- 11 For a more complete discussion of the Kurdish peace process and its importance to Turkey and to the region, see Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, "The United States, Turkey, and the Kurdish Regions: The Peace Process in Context" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2014), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2014/07/31/94936/the-united-states-turkey-and-the-kurdish-regions/>.
- 12 Republic of Turkey, "Constitution of the Republic of Turkey," available at http://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf (last accessed February 2015).
- 13 The White House, "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament."
- 14 For example, in the wake of the December 2013 corruption scandal that rocked his government and led to the arrest of two cabinet ministers, Erdoğan implied that the United States was somehow behind the plot and threatened the U.S. ambassador at the time, Francis Ricciardone, with expulsion. See *Today's Zaman*, "Erdoğan implies US ambassador could be expelled," December 21, 2013, available at http://www.todayszaman.com/latest-news_erdogan-implies-us-ambassador-could-be-expelled_334605.html. Erdoğan has also repeatedly denounced the West in general terms, most recently claiming that "foreigners love oil, gold, diamonds, and the cheap labor force of the Islamic world. They like the conflicts, fights and quarrels of the Middle East. Believe me, they don't like us ... They look like friends, but they want us dead, they like seeing our children die. How long will we stand that fact?" See Agence France-Presse, "Foreigners don't like Muslims, only their money: Turkish President Erdoğan," November 27, 2014, available at <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/foreigners-dont-like-muslims-only-their-money-turkish-president-erdogan.aspx?PageID=238&NID=74893&NewsCatID=338>.
- 15 Comments from Ömer Taşpınar at a Center for American Progress roundtable discussion, November 12, 2014, used with his permission.
- 16 Amnesty International, "Gezi Park Protests: Brutal Denial of the Right to Peaceful Assembly in Turkey" (2013), available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR44/022/2013/en/>.
- 17 The governing party has sought to suppress dissent through an array of means: outright censorship; public ridicule or veiled threats toward reporters; pressure on the owners of media outlets to stifle dissent by firing or threatening to fire reporters; restricting access to online information; levying tax fines against critical outlets; or filing libel suits. The issue of press freedom is addressed by numerous reports, including Max Hoffman and Michael Werz, "Freedom of the Press and Expression in Turkey" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2013), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2013/05/14/63159/freedom-of-the-press-and-expression-in-turkey/>.
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- 23 Daloglu, "Turkish media banned from reporting on Mosul hostage crisis."
- 24 *Hürriyet Daily News*, "Death toll in Turkey climbs to 37 as interior minister presents grave cost of unrest," October 10, 2014, available at <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/death-toll-in-turkey-climbs-to-37-as-interior-minister-presents-grave-cost-of-unrest.aspx?PageID=238&NID=72791&NewsCatID=341>.

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