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# Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief

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## Introduction

Several Turkish foreign and domestic policy issues have significant relevance for U.S. interests, and Congress plays an active role in shaping and overseeing U.S. relations with Turkey.

This report provides information and analysis relevant for Congress on the following:

- Assessments of U.S.-Turkey relations, Turkish foreign policy, and Turkey's strategic orientation.
- Turkish efforts to cooperate with the United States against the Islamic State (IS, also known as Daesh, ISIS, and ISIL) in Syria and Iraq.
- Key issues regarding Turkey's domestic politics. These include controversies and questions involving Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* or AKP) following the AKP's November 2015 electoral victory, and the Turkish government's renewed hostilities (since July) with the longtime Kurdish nationalist insurgent group PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party or *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanê*).

For additional information and analysis, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

## U.S.-Turkey Relations and Turkish Foreign Policy

There have been many situations in which the United States and Turkey have made common cause during their decades-long alliance in NATO, but their strategic cooperation also has a history of complications. This is based largely on divergences in how the two countries' leaders have assessed their respective interests given different geographical positions, threat perceptions, and roles in regional and global political and security architectures. Domestic politics in both countries have also played a role. Yet, both countries have continued to affirm the importance of an enduring strategic relationship. A number of policy differences have arisen in the past few years. It remains unclear whether these differences are mainly the latest manifestations of structural tension, or whether they signal a more substantive change in the bilateral relationship.

Since the mid-2000s, President (formerly Prime Minister) Erdogan and Prime Minister (formerly Foreign Minister) Ahmet Davutoglu have consistently articulated an ambitious foreign policy vision. This vision—aspects of which Davutoglu has expressed at times through phrases such as “strategic depth” or “zero problems with neighbors”—draws upon Turkey's historical, cultural, and religious knowledge of and ties with other regional actors, as well as its soft power appeal.<sup>1</sup> Erdogan, Davutoglu, and other Turkish leaders often indicate to the United States and other countries that Turkey's unique regional status as a Muslim-majority democracy with a robust economy and membership in NATO can positively influence surrounding geographical areas both politically and economically.

Turkey has become a more influential actor in the Middle East in the past decade, having sought to leverage the regional status discussed above. However, recent foreign and domestic policy developments may have rendered Turkey less potent or desirable than once generally supposed as

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Ahmet Davutoglu, “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring,” International Policy and Leadership Institute and Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), Turkey Policy Brief Series, 2012 – Third Edition.

a shaper of regional outcomes, a model for neighboring countries, and a facilitator of U.S. interests.<sup>2</sup> Still, it remains a key regional power that shares linkages and characteristics with the West that may distinguish it from other potentially region-shaping Muslim-majority powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Therefore, working with Turkey is likely to remain relevant for the advancement of U.S. interests in the volatile region.<sup>3</sup> This may be especially true if there are significant changes in U.S. relations with Iran that affect the larger regional context of widespread instability and complex alignments among various states and non-state actors. Nevertheless, engagement with Turkey—critical as it might be on specific issues—is unlikely to overshadow other aspects of a U.S. multilateral approach to addressing problems in the region.

Turkey’s NATO membership and economic interdependence with Europe appear to have contributed to important Turkish decisions to rely on, and partner with, sources of Western strength. However, as Turkey has prospered, its economic success has taken place alongside efforts to seek greater overall self-reliance and independence in foreign policy.

**Figure 1. Turkey: Map and Basic Facts**



**Sources:** Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated by Hannah Fischer using Department of State Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); ArcWorld (2014); DeLorme (2014). Fact information (2015

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Blaise Misztal, et al., “Elections in Turkey: Foreign Policy Reset Unlikely Under President Erdogan,” *The American Interest*, August 7, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., M. Hakan Yavuz and Mujeeb R. Khan, “Turkey Treads a Positive Path,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2015.

estimates unless otherwise specified) from International Monetary Fund, *Global Economic Outlook*; Turkish Statistical Institute; Economist Intelligence Unit; and Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*.

Turkish leaders sometimes express concern that U.S. expectations of Turkish cooperation regarding Syria and Iraq are insufficiently sensitive to Turkey's domestic pressures and security vulnerabilities. Turkey faces the significant burden of hosting refugees from both Syria and Iraq; more than 1.9 million Syrian refugees have entered Turkey since 2011, and they are particularly concentrated in its southeast and its main urban centers. Erdogan (first as prime minister and now as president) and President Obama reportedly have had less direct interaction since 2013, perhaps owing to differences over both foreign policy and the Turkish government's handling of domestic affairs.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, as discussed further below, developments since 2014 regarding the Syrian Kurds' control of territory and military capabilities have led to some U.S.-Turkey differences. Yet, as described below, Turkey is partnering with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition in a number of ways.

## U.S.-Turkey Coordination Against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq

### Overview

In late July 2015, Turkish officials confirmed that they would allow the United States and other members of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State organization to use Turkish territory and airspace for anti-IS airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, significantly easing the logistical burdens of coalition operations.<sup>5</sup> The Obama Administration and Turkish officials agreed to these arrangements as part of a larger plan to coordinate U.S.-Turkey action to counter the Islamic State. Turkish officials had previously limited Turkey-based coalition operations to surveillance flights, reportedly as a means of insisting on a "safe zone" in Syria and seeking U.S. support for more aggressive efforts to oust the Iranian-backed Syrian government.

Past Turkish insistence on these measures appear to have resembled pleas that Turkish leaders made similar pleas following the 1991 Gulf War for help in preventing refugee burdens.<sup>6</sup> In that case, the United States established a humanitarian safe zone with ground forces and then patrolled a no-fly zone in northern Iraq.<sup>7</sup> In November 4, 2015, testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Anne Patterson said that the establishment of a safe zone

...is a hugely complex and resource-intensive issue. And the administration has looked at this over and over and over again, and there is no option on the table, nor recommended by the Department of Defense, that does not require a massive, massive amount of air support that would then detract from the effort against ISIL. We continue to look at this. We continue to study this. But there is no viable option on the table at this time.

<sup>4</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "The Fragile Thaw in U.S.-Turkey Relations," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2402, April 7, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Kozak, "Turkey Expands Campaign Against ISIS and the PKK," Institute for the Study of War, July 25, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Morton Abramowitz, "Remembering Turgut Ozal: Some Personal Recollections," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 42-43.

<sup>7</sup> For information on some of those operations, see Gordon W. Rudd, *Humanitarian Intervention: Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, 1991*, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2004, available at [http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian\\_intervention/CMH\\_70-78.pdf](http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian_intervention/CMH_70-78.pdf).

U.S. airstrikes from Turkey commenced in August 2015 via drone aircraft, which have since been joined at Turkish bases by manned fighter and support aircraft,<sup>9</sup> along with accompanying personnel deployments.

Turkey also took its first open, direct military action against the Islamic State in Syria during that late July timeframe. In late August, the first joint U.S.-Turkey airstrikes against IS targets in Syria reportedly took place.

Congress and other U.S. policymakers, along with many international actors, have shown significant concern about the use of Turkish territory by various groups and individuals involved in Syria's conflict—including foreign fighters from around the world—for transit, safe haven, and smuggling. Most sources and U.S. officials acknowledge that Turkey has introduced or bolstered existing anti-IS initiatives over the past year, in response to international pressure<sup>10</sup> and growing Turkish official recognition of threats posed to Turkish security by the Islamic State and other jihadists. Such initiatives are aimed at (1) preventing potential foreign fighters from entering Turkey, (2) preventing those who enter Turkey from traveling to Syria, and (3) curbing illicit oil smuggling used to finance jihadist activities.<sup>11</sup>

### **Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Targets and Threats to U.S. Citizens**

Since the outbreak of conflict in Syria, there have been two terrorist attacks against U.S. installations in Turkey. On November 1, 2013, a suicide bomber killed himself and a Turkish security guard outside the U.S. embassy in Ankara. On August 10, 2015, two female militants attacked the U.S. consulate in Istanbul without inflicting casualties and were apprehended by Turkish authorities. Both attacks have been attributed to the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization with anti-U.S. and anti-NATO views and some historical links to the Syrian government.

On September 3, 2015, the State Department issued a travel warning authorizing the voluntary departure of government family members "out of an abundance of caution following the commencement of military operations [as described below in relation to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq] out of Incirlik Air Base." The Defense Department said that the military would pay for the departure of families of servicemembers who choose to leave.<sup>8</sup>

The travel warning also announced specific travel restrictions for U.S. government employees in southeastern Turkey, and strongly recommended that U.S. citizens avoid (1) areas in close proximity to the Syrian border and (2) demonstrations and large gatherings.

## **Complications Involving the Kurds**

Many observers speculate that Turkey's increased coordination with the United States is aimed at gaining greater influence over the unfolding geopolitical, ethnic, and sectarian struggle along the Turkey-Syria frontier.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after Turkey commenced military strikes against the Islamic State in Syria in late July, Turkey resumed hostilities with the PKK. Since a fall 2014 crisis in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, a number of analysts have speculated that Turkey is more

<sup>8</sup> David Francis, "U.S. Officials Authorize Families of American Personnel Near Key Turkish Air Base to Leave," *foreignpolicy.com*, September 3, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Fraser, "U.S. Deploys 6 F-15 Fighter Jets to Turkish Air Base," *Associated Press*, November 6, 2015; Nicholas de Larrinaga, "USAF deploys A-10s to Incirlik for Syria strikes," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 22, 2015; Search-and-rescue aircraft (helicopters and transport planes) have been deployed to a base in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir. "US sends search-and-rescue aircraft, crew to Turkey," *Associated Press*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> U.N. Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2178 (passed in August and September 2014, respectively) call upon member states to curtail flows of weapons, financing, and fighters to various terrorist groups.

<sup>11</sup> For information on oil smuggling from Syria into Turkey, see CRS Report R43980, *Islamic State Financing and U.S. Policy Approaches*, by Carla E. Humud, Robert Pirog, and Liana W. Rosen.

<sup>12</sup> Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, "Turkey agrees to allow U.S. military to use its base to attack Islamic State," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2015.



concerned about containing Kurdish political aspirations (with their potential cross-border implications) than countering Islamist extremism at and within its borders.<sup>13</sup> Turkey is reportedly worried about recent gains by the People's Protection Units (Kurdish acronym YPG), a militia dominated by the Syrian Kurdish group known as the Democratic Union Party (Kurdish acronym PYD),<sup>14</sup> as well as about U.S.-PYD/YPG coordination. The PYD is closely affiliated with the PKK. Recent YPG gains raise the possibility of PKK-affiliated control over most of Syria's northern border (see **Figure 2** below).<sup>15</sup> In September 2015, Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu said:

By mounting operations against [IS] and the PKK at the same time, we also prevented the PKK from legitimizing itself. Until the PYD changes its stance, we will continue to see it in the same way that we see the PKK.<sup>16</sup>

Although the United States has considered the PKK to be a terrorist group since 1997, it does not apply this characterization to the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG. A State Department deputy spokesperson said in an October 20, 2014, daily press briefing that “the PYD is a different group than the PKK legally, under United States law.” In a September 21, 2015, daily press briefing, the State Department spokesperson said that the United States does not consider the YPG to be a terrorist organization, and that despite Turkish concerns about the group, a coalition of the willing does not “have to agree on every issue.”

**Figure 2. Syria: Areas of Kurdish Control**



**Source:** Mike King, *New York Review of Books* (accessed November 13, 2015).

**Notes:** All locations are approximate

<sup>13</sup> Orhan Coskun and Dasha Afanasieva, “Turkey stages first air strikes on Islamic State in Syria,” *Reuters*, July 24, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> The YPG is formally the military arm of a de facto government established by the PYD and the Kurdistan National Council (KNC). The KNC is aligned with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant faction within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq led by President Masoud Barzani. Soner Cagaptay and Andrew Tabler, “The U.S.-PYD-Turkey Puzzle,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, PolicyWatch 2510, October 25, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Henri J. Barkey, “What’s Behind Turkey’s U-Turn on the Islamic State?,” *Woodrow Wilson Center*, July 29, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Semih Idiz, “Turkey’s Middle East policy ‘fiasco,’” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, September 28, 2015.

## Looking Ahead

The overall trajectory of U.S.-Turkey cooperation in Syria remains unclear. In the summer of 2015, officials from both countries anticipated coordinating air operations to clear a specific area of northwest Syria of IS forces (roughly between the Afrin and Kobane cantons found in **Figure 2** above). However, the following developments appear to have subsequently complicated prospects for such operations, even as the United States, Turkey, Russia, Iran, and other countries meet periodically to discuss diplomatic options:

- Russia’s growing direct military involvement in Syria (including at least two instances in October in which Russian aircraft reportedly breached Turkish airspace) and renewed international diplomacy aimed at addressing the conflict.
- The October reconfiguration of the U.S. train-and-equip program toward U.S. arming of groups in Syria (including an umbrella organization involving the YPG, various Syrian Arab rebel factions, and some Assyrian Christians), and the direct insertion of U.S. special forces.<sup>17</sup> The Obama Administration announced the reconfiguration after a few cases in which Syrian anti-IS fighters trained in Turkey were captured by or provided weapons to other militant groups.

Even if these or other complications do not prevent the United States and Turkey from eventually moving forward with establishing some sort of patrolled zone, who might secure such an area on the ground remains unclear. Turkey clearly rejects the notion of permitting Syrian Kurdish forces (PYD/YPG) to occupy the area. Possible Russian interest in partnering with the YPG against Sunni Islamist fighters<sup>18</sup> could fuel U.S.-Russia competition for Kurdish support that might isolate Turkey further in its adversarial stance toward the YPG. Meanwhile, media reports indicate that the United States is unwilling to accept, as patrollers of a zone, the Islamist-led Syrian opposition forces that Turkey and various Arab Gulf states are reportedly supporting.<sup>19</sup>

Turkish officials have expressed hopes that an “IS free” zone might create opportunities for Syrian refugees to return to their home country and to mitigate future refugee flows.<sup>20</sup> An unknown number of refugees living in Turkey—originally from Syria, Iraq, or elsewhere—are seeking permanent refuge in Europe. Reportedly, some “have been living in Turkey for months, sometimes years. They complain that Turkey’s failure to grant them full refugee status has made it a struggle to access basic services and jobs.”<sup>21</sup> Crossings over land to Europe are generally

<sup>17</sup> According to one U.S. journalist, “Pentagon officials say the Turks should be reassured, because the U.S. will now have greater oversight of the YPG’s 25,000 fighters and can prevent supplies from getting to the PKK, which Turkey views as a terrorist group.” David Ignatius, “The Syrian Tinderbox,” *Washington Post*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., “YPG says it is ready to cooperate with Russia against IS,” *Kurdpress*, October 1, 2015; “Pro-Hezbollah daily says party in Syria pact with Russia,” *Now*, September 23, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Jamie Dettmer, “Russia’s Buildup in Syria May Thwart Idea of Safe Haven,” *Voice of America*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Barnard, et al., “Turkey and U.S. Plan to Create Syria ‘Safe Zone’ Free of ISIS,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> “Refugees dispersed from Turkey-Greece border in buses,” *Agence France Presse*, September 20, 2015. According to the instrument of its accession to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, “the Government of Turkey maintains the provisions of the declaration made under section B of article 1 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, done at Geneva on 28 July 1951, according to which it applies the Convention only to persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe,” [http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/international\\_treaties.php?id\\_state=226](http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/international_treaties.php?id_state=226). In 2014, Turkey enacted a Law on Foreigners and International Protection which—despite the geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention—provides protection and assistance for asylum-seekers and refugees, regardless of their country of origin. 2015 UNHCR country operations (continued...)



closed to refugees and undocumented migrants. Some people have nevertheless found their way past the official checkpoints on land, while many others try sea routes—especially to nearby Greek islands—on crowded boats under questionable safety conditions.<sup>22</sup>

European leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel have opened discussions with Turkey about the possibility of providing Turkey with humanitarian aid to increase its cooperation in stemming refugee and migrant flows. As part of such an arrangement, Europeans might show greater consideration of Turkish aspirations for visa-free travel to European countries, and for resuming European Union accession negotiations.<sup>23</sup> However, some human rights activists have expressed concern about any arrangement that might result in reduced international scrutiny of Turkey's commitment to civil liberties.<sup>24</sup>

A number of questions surround U.S.-Turkey dealings regarding Syria and Iraq. These include:

- To what extent might Russian-Iranian and U.S.-led actions in Syria—potentially seen by significant segments of Turkey's population as bolstering anti-Sunni and pro-Kurdish outcomes—affect Turkey's willingness to combat the Islamic State?
- How can the United States coordinate operations with both Turkey and the PYD/YPG, and what are the larger implications for the parties and the region?
- What effect will U.S.-Turkey dealings have on military and political outcomes in Syria? Will they make the survival of Bashar al Asad and his regime more or less likely? Would Turkey benefit from a de facto or formal partition of Syria?
- How will developments in the region and in potential destination countries in Europe affect the situation of Syrian and Iraqi refugees currently in Turkey? To what extent are refugees likely to remain in Turkey, return to Syria or Iraq, or resettle in third countries?

## Domestic Politics and Stability

Turkish domestic politics feature controversies regarding power, constitutional democracy, corruption, and civil liberties; renewed Turkey-PKK conflict with the potential to destabilize significant areas of the country; security concerns regarding Syria and Iraq; and economic anxieties. The vigorous debate over whether (and, if so, how) President Erdogan exercises authoritarian control over Turkey's government and society will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

It is unclear to what extent non-Turkish actors will play a significant role in resolving unanswered questions regarding Turkey's commitment to democracy and limited government, its secular-religious balance, and its Kurdish question. Erdogan and his supporters periodically resort to criticism of Western countries in apparent efforts to galvanize domestic political support against outside influences.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, some observers assert that various security-related concerns—

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(...continued)

profile – Turkey.

<sup>22</sup> Rick Lyman, "Bulgaria Puts Up a New Wall, but This One Keeps People Out," *New York Times*, April 6, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Valentina Pop, "EU Readies Migrant Aid for Turkey," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Arango, "Merkel Links Turkey's E.U. Hopes to Stemming Flow of Refugees," *New York Times*, October 18, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Mustafa Akyol, "What turned Erdogan against the West?," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, February 3, 2015.

"Congressional Turkish caucus raps Erdogan for Israel comments," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)*, August 6, 2014. (continued...)

such as those involving the Islamic State and refugees—make the United States and the European Union less likely to try to check Turkish officials’ domestic actions.<sup>26</sup>

See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti, for additional background information and analysis on Turkey’s domestic politics, including the Fethullah Gulen movement.

## 2015 Elections and Questions Regarding Continued AKP Rule

On November 1, 2015, the AKP (or AK Party) won back the majority it had lost during elections five months earlier in June, in which no party won a majority. The November result surprised most pollsters and other observers, but represented a return to form for the AKP, which had enjoyed consistent electoral success since first coming to power in 2002. It also signaled an end to a long season in Turkish politics that featured two solid years of electoral campaigns.

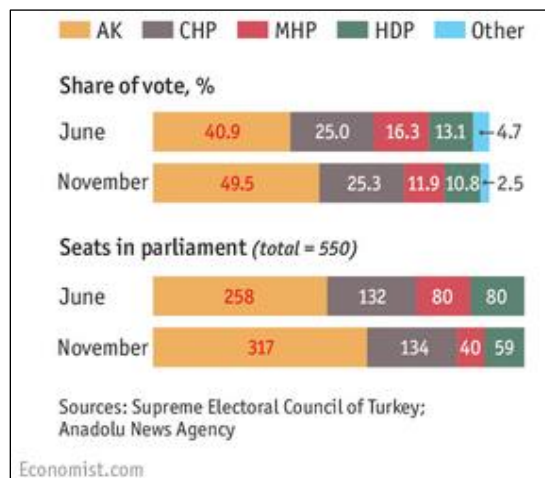
The run-up to the November election featured intense controversy over reports of intimidation of and government interference with a number of media outlets,<sup>27</sup> as well as over major terrorist suicide bombings at a largely Kurdish peace rally in Ankara on October 10. The bombing, which was apparently linked to the Islamic State, left more than 100 dead.

The day after the election, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said:

We look forward to working with the newly elected parliament and with the future government. As a friend and NATO ally, the United States is committed to continuing our close coordination with Turkey to advance our shared political, security and prosperity agendas.

We are, however, deeply concerned that media outlets and individual journalists critical of the government were subject to pressure and intimidation during the campaign, seemingly in a manner calculated to weaken political opposition. We note that the OSCE released a statement today highlighting that parliamentary elections in Turkey offered voters a variety of choices but that the campaign was affected by violence and restrictions on media freedom. We have both publicly and privately raised our concerns about freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in Turkey, and we

**Figure 3. Turkish Election Results**  
(June and November 2015)



(...continued)

An AKP parliamentary leader subsequently sent a written response disputing the letter’s assertions. Eli Lake, “Turkish Leader Doubles Down on Blaming Israel for Anti-Semitism,” *Daily Beast*, August 6, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., “Turkey’s AK party: Another victory for illiberalism,” *Economist*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., “Erdogan’s Formula for Consolidating Clout in Turkey,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2015.

continue to urge Turkish authorities to uphold the universal democratic values that are enshrined in Turkey's constitution.<sup>28</sup>

The AKP gained from President Erdogan's decision to call new elections rather than contemplate a coalition arrangement based on the June outcome. The AKP's results improved despite the multiple internal and external challenges that intensified for Turkey in the months between the two elections—increased security concerns, a seemingly slowing economy, and issues regarding civil liberties. Erdogan (officially a nonpartisan actor, but still the AKP's leading figure) and Prime Minister Davutoglu appear to have won back votes for the AKP largely based on (1) the argument (using selective examples from past decades of Turkey's republican history) that a majority government would provide greater stability than a coalition, (2) an assertive approach to combating and criticizing the PKK after the July outbreak of violence that apparently resonated with Turkish nationalists and conservative Kurds, and (3) reassurances of economic security.<sup>29</sup>

The Kurdish nationalist-rooted Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) still managed to get the 10% of the vote it needed to maintain its place in Turkey's parliament, thereby preventing the AKP from the supermajority it would need (330 parliamentary seats) to call a constitutional referendum. President Erdogan and his associates frequently proclaim their interest in holding such a referendum to expand Erdogan's formal powers. Under Turkey's 1982 constitution, as amended, most executive power resides with the prime minister. Barring any midterm changes in leadership, Erdogan, Davutoglu, and the AKP will remain in power until presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 2019.

With post-election Turkey facing a daunting array of challenges, U.S. policymakers and other observers are focused on the following questions, each of which has implications for the others:

- **Security Issues:** How will AKP's victory affect Turkey's approaches to Syria and Iraq, and to challenges both domestic and foreign regarding Kurds and the Islamic State? To what extent will Turkish leaders countenance or oppose U.S. assistance for the PYD/YPG and/or proposals permitting a continued role in Syria for Bashar al Asad? To what extent will Turkish leaders feel emboldened to continue objecting to these initiatives and/or to pursue conflict with adversaries?
- **Domestic Policy:** Will Erdogan and Davutoglu seek greater accommodation with non-AKP constituencies and opposing or independent voices from civil society now that Turkey's two-year electoral season has ended, or will they use their mandate more confrontationally? Specifically, how might they seek to bolster Erdogan's powers either via constitutional change or the broad use of Erdogan's existing legal prerogatives and his personal control or influence over key economic, bureaucratic, and media networks?<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Newark, New Jersey, 11/2/2015. On October 26, 65 Members of Congress signed an October 26 letter to President Obama to "support and encourage free, open, and fair elections in Turkey." Text of letter available at <http://rokita.house.gov/sites/rokita.house.gov/files/10-26-2015-Turkey-Free-Open-Fair-Elections.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> For various analyses, see Yusuf Muftuoglu, "How Erdogan's Dramatic Comeback Happened, and How Far Its Impact Might Reach," *Huffington Post*, November 2, 2015; Mustafa Akyol, "How the AKP dominated yesterday's election in Turkey," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, November 2, 2015; Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Islamist Party Gains Majority in Turkish Vote," *New York Times*, November 2, 2015; "Second time's a charm: A huge win for Turkey's ruling AK party," *economist.com*, November 2, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> One U.S.-based analyst claims that Erdogan and his associates control approximately 70 percent of Turkey's media outlets. Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey's Elections, the Syrian Crisis, and the US," *American Interest*, November 4, 2015.

- **Economy:** How will the AKP deliver on its promises of economic security in light of negative economic trends in Turkey regarding growth, exports, currency strength, and security-related disruptions to tourism and other key sectors?

## Recent Resumption of Turkey-PKK Violence and Future Prospects

As mentioned above, Turkey's government and the PKK resumed hostilities in July 2015 amid mutual recrimination, ending a cease-fire that had been in place since March 2013 as part of a broader Turkey-PKK "peace process." Subsequently, Turkish authorities have arrested hundreds of terrorism suspects in southeastern Turkey and Turkey-PKK violence has resulted in hundreds of casualties.<sup>31</sup> A temporary cease-fire to allow for the November 1 elections to take place ended almost immediately afterwards, with Erdogan vowing to bring about the PKK's defeat and disarmament.<sup>32</sup>

The following is one Turkish journalist's explanation of key contributing factors to the resumption of violence:

...the growing strength of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the civil war in Syria have given a boost to Kurdish nationalism and have been advantageous for the PKK. PKK leadership, aware of the fact that the government was not sincere in advancing the peace process, was ensuring its readiness during the cease-fire period in case the process failed.<sup>33</sup>

Turkey-PKK violence has led Turkish authorities to take emergency measures in hopes of pacifying conflict in key southeastern urban areas. This has fueled international concerns about possible human rights abuses.<sup>34</sup> In the summer of 2015, Turkish citizens opposed to the PKK violence launched demonstrations throughout the country. A number of attacks on HDP political offices, as part of mass demonstrations, took place in apparent reprisal for PKK actions. Some HDP offices were also attacked prior to the June elections. Theories about who provoked these reprisals focused on Turkish nationalist groups,<sup>35</sup> with some commentators claiming that Erdogan may have provided partial incitement with public statements conflating the HDP with the PKK.<sup>36</sup> The October 10 suicide bombings in Ankara led to renewed nationalistic recriminations and allegations that the government provided insufficient security for the targeted pro-Kurdish rally.

U.S. officials, while supportive of Turkey's prerogative to defend itself from attacks, have advised Turkey to show restraint and proportionality in its actions against the PKK. They also have expressed desires for the parties to resolve their differences peaceably. Many European officials have called for an immediate end to violence and resumption of peace talks.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> One estimate claims that since June 2015, "more than 150 Turkish security officials and hundreds of PKK fighters have been killed in the conflict." Dion Nissenbaum, "Turkish Jets Strike at Kurds," *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Emre Peker, "Turkish Leader Seeks More Powers," *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Lale Kemal, "Cease-fire may spoil political game," *Today's Zaman*, September 10, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Statement by the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, "Turkey should ensure immediate access to Cizre by independent observers," September 11, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Alex McDonald, "Far-right activists attack HDP offices across Turkey after anti-PKK demos," *Middle East Eye*, September 8, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Emma Sinclair-Webb, "Turkey: media crackdown amid escalating violence," *openDemocracy*, September 11, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Many Western European countries have sizeable populations of Turkish Kurdish origin (more than a million Kurds live in Europe), and the PKK reportedly maintains a presence in some of these countries as well.

The future trajectory of Turkey-PKK violence and political negotiation may depend on a number of factors, including:

- Which Kurdish figures and groups (the imprisoned PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan, various PKK militant leaders, the professedly nonviolent HDP) are most influential in choosing between armed struggle and political negotiation.
- Erdogan's approach to and influence on Turkish government policy regarding the Kurdish issue. Most domestic and international observers previously considered Erdogan to be the only Turkish leader strong enough to deliver a peaceful solution, but Turkey's recent turn to military force has led many to question this assumption.
- How the resumption of violence might affect Turkey's internal stability, governing institutions, and ability to administer the southeast. Some analysts express concern about civil conflict, and also question whether the military's involvement in this issue could lead to its return to a more prominent role in Turkish governance.<sup>38</sup> Many Kurdish militants, activists, and local leaders in various parts of southeastern Turkey appear to be pressing for imminent autonomy.
- The extent to which the United States and perhaps European actors might—based on their view of the issue's priority—offer incentives to or impose costs on Turkey and the PKK in efforts to mitigate violence and promote a political resolution.

## Turkey's Strategic Orientation: Past, Present, Future

Many observers express opinions on the future trend of Turkey's strategic orientation. Turkey's embrace of the United States and NATO during the Cold War came largely as a reaction to post-World War II actions by the Soviet Union seemingly aimed at moving Turkey and its strategic control of maritime access points into a Soviet sphere of influence. Turkey's historically driven efforts to avoid domination by outside powers—sometimes called the “Sèvres syndrome”<sup>39</sup>—resonate in its ongoing attempts to achieve greater military, economic, and political self-sufficiency and to influence its surrounding environment. Such initiatives could—based on a number of variables—lead Turkey toward a more independent stance, in which decreased dependence on the West might come at least partly through dealings with a number of other regional and global powers.

Whether this could ultimately lead to new dynamics of dependence on or alignment with other powers has become a subject of speculation. In recent years, Turkey has boosted cooperation in certain areas with Russia (energy and trade) and China (trade and defense), among other countries. Some observers assert that domestic developments in Turkey appearing to challenge Western liberal norms may partially echo those in Russia and in some other countries. These observations fuel debate regarding how such trends might affect Turkey's foreign policy partnerships.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Barcin Yinanc, “New army chief's faces four challenges to transform Armed Forces,” *hurriyetdailynews.com*, August 10, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Nick Danforth, “Forget Sykes-Picot. It's the Treaty of Sèvres That Explains the Modern Middle East,” *foreignpolicy.com*, August 10, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Dombey, “Putin and Erdogan: not quite kindred spirits,” *ft.com*, December 2, 2014.

A more assertively independent Turkey might still seek to remain within the framework of the NATO alliance. However, the extent to which strategic and practical coordination with other NATO members would continue is unclear, especially if Turkey strengthens ties with countries that challenge U.S. policies globally or regionally. For the time being, Turkey lacks comparable alternatives to its security and economic ties with the West, with which it shares a more than 60-year legacy of institutionalized cooperation. Its leaders may therefore be responsive to efforts by allies and key trading partners to identify priorities relating to this legacy of cooperation. For example, after Turkey's initial announcement in September 2013 that it planned to co-produce a missile defense system with China, it has since reconsidered.<sup>41</sup> Also, following Russia's military escalation in Syria during the fall of 2015, Turkey has apparently bolstered its cooperation with the United States and has stated it might be willing to redefine some aspects of its energy cooperation with Russia.<sup>42</sup> However, Turkish leaders' receptivity to Turkey's traditional Western allies could wane over time if they believe that Turkey's interests and preferred approaches to issues are not addressed by or reflected in key Western initiatives or institutional frameworks and processes.

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<sup>41</sup> Lale Sariibrahimoglu and Nicholas de Larrinaga, "T-Loramids decision nearing, says Turkish procurement chief," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 27, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Daren Butler, "Turkey's Erdogan warns Russia on nuclear project, natural gas – papers," *Reuters*, October 8, 2015.