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Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief

name redacted

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

March 18, 2016

Congressional Research Service

7-....

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R44000

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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:

- General assessments of U.S.-Turkey relations and Turkish foreign policy.
- Specific aspects of U.S.-Turkey dealings regarding Syria and Iraq, including a number of complicated issues involving the Islamic State organization (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or the Arabic acronym Da'esh), Kurdish groups and other regional and international actors (i.e., Syrian government, Russia, European Union, Iran, Arab Gulf states), refugees and migrants, “safe zones,” border security, and terrorism.
- 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), and the Turkish government’s ongoing hostilities with the Kurdish nationalist insurgent group PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party or *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*).

For additional information and analysis, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted)

U.S.-Turkey Relations and Turkish Foreign Policy

There have been many situations in which the United States and Turkey have cooperated during their decades-long alliance in NATO, but at many times they have also been at odds. Differences have stemmed largely from on divergences in leaders’ assessments of respective interests given their differing (1) geographical positions, (2) threat perceptions, and (3) roles in regional and global political and security architectures. Nonetheless, both countries have continued to affirm the importance of an enduring strategic relationship.

Since President (formerly Prime Minister) Erdogan and Prime Minister (formerly Foreign Minister) Davutoglu began exercising control over foreign policy in the previous decade, Turkey has sought greater influence in the Middle East as part of a more outward looking foreign policy vision than that embraced by past Turkish leaders.¹ Turkey’s “range of critical and overlapping roles” as a Muslim-majority democracy with a robust economy and membership in NATO has largely been viewed by the West as an asset for promoting its ties with the region.² However, recent foreign and domestic policy developments may have constrained Turkey’s role as a shaper of regional outcomes, a model for neighboring countries, and a facilitator of U.S. interests. In response to recent turmoil at and within Turkey’s borders, and to some conflicting priorities Turkey appears to have with the United States and other major actors in the region, one Turkish analyst said in early 2016 that Turkey “cannot protect its vital interests, and it is at odds with

¹ See, e.g., Omer Taspinar, “Turkey’s Strategic Vision and Syria,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3, Summer 2012, pp. 127-140.

² “Foreign policy: Alone in the world,” *Economist*, February 6, 2016.

everyone, including its allies.”³ A journalist reporting on his extensive March 2016 interview with President Obama about his Administration’s foreign policy decisions wrote the following:

Early on, Obama saw Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, as the sort of moderate Muslim leader who would bridge the divide between East and West—but Obama now considers him a failure and an authoritarian, one who refuses to use his enormous army to bring stability to Syria.⁴

In providing context for Obama’s apparent views, the White House press secretary said in a March 11 press gaggle that Turkey has engaged more effectively in the anti-IS coalition “over the last nine months or so” after the Administration spent some period of time urging it to do so.⁵ (For the press secretary’s context on Turkish domestic issues, see “Domestic Politics and Stability” below.)

Regardless of some difficulties with the United States and other key actors, Turkey remains a key regional power that shares linkages and characteristics with the West that may distinguish it from other Muslim-majority regional powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Therefore, cooperation with Turkey, along with other actors, is likely to remain relevant for the advancement of U.S. interests in the volatile region.⁶

Turkey’s NATO membership and economic interdependence with Europe appear to have contributed to important Turkish decisions to rely on, and partner with the West on security and other matters. However, Turkey’s significant economic development over the past three decades has contributed to its efforts to seek greater overall self-reliance and independence in foreign policy.⁷

³ Soli Ozel of Kadir Has University in Istanbul, quoted in Liz Sly, “Turkey’s increasingly desperate predicament poses real dangers,” *Washington Post*, February 20, 2016.

⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, from the April 2016 issue.

⁵ Text available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/14/press-gaggle-press-secretary-en-route-austin-texas-31116>.

⁶ See, e.g., M. Hakan Yavuz and Mujeeb R. Khan, “Turkey Treads a Positive Path,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2015.

⁷ Among other Turkish foreign policy initiatives, Turkey announced in mid-December 2015 that it would construct a multipurpose military base in Qatar. The base, which is being established pursuant to a 2014 bilateral security agreement, appears to be calculated to intensify the two countries’ partnership against common security threats. Both countries “have provided support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, backed rebels fighting to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and raised the alarm about creeping Iranian influence in the region.” Tom Finn, “Turkey to set up Qatar military base to face ‘common enemies,’” *Reuters*, December 16, 2015. In another initiative, Turkey boosted a troop deployment in northern Iraq in late 2015 against the wishes of the Iraqi central government, reportedly prompting President Obama to intercede with President Erdogan to have Turkey withdraw some of the troops. “Turkey will withdraw more troops from Iraq after US request,” *Associated Press*, December 20, 2015. The deployment remains a source of Turkey-Iraq tension.

Figure I. Turkey: Map and Basic Facts



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

Syria and Iraq

Overall Assessment of U.S.-Turkey Dealings

A number of developments, such as international jihadist terror incidents and refugee flows, particularly in the past year, have driven U.S. expectations regarding Turkish cooperation with respect to Syria and Iraq. Such expectations seem to center on Turkey’s willingness and ability to

- prevent the flow of fighters, weapons, oil, and other non-humanitarian supplies into and out of Syria from benefitting the Islamic State and other global jihadist movements; and
- clearly prioritize anti-IS efforts in relation to other strategic concerns regarding Kurdish groups and the Asad regime in Syria.

Though some observers alleged that Turkey had been slow in 2013 and 2014 to curtail activities involving its territory that were seen as bolstering ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups,⁸ Turkey has partnered with the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition, including through hosting coalition aircraft (since summer 2015) that strike targets in Syria and Iraq. Other regional U.S. partners include several Arab states, Iraq's central government, and Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria.

But Turkish leaders still confront domestic pressures and security vulnerabilities.⁹ They have sought greater intelligence sharing from foreign fighters' countries of origin, with some success.¹⁰ Turkey also faces the significant burden of hosting refugees from Syria and elsewhere; more than two million refugees have entered Turkey since 2011, and they are particularly concentrated in its southeast and its main urban centers. Turkish priorities for Syria and Iraq seem to include

- countering threats to Turkish security, territorial integrity, and domestic stability;
- reducing Turkey's responsibilities for refugees; and
- achieving lasting resolutions in order to relieve refugee flows and other challenges to Turkey, promote Turkey's regional influence, and provide substantive political empowerment for Sunni Arabs and Turkmen.

Over the past two years, Turkey has stepped up IS-focused border security and counterterrorism measures, presumably in response to international pressure,¹¹ An additional motivation may be concerns regarding Turkey's stability and economic well-being (including its tourist industry).¹² Since the last half of 2014, Turkey has introduced or boosted initiatives 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.¹³ Since July 2015, a number of apparent Islamic State suicide bombings (though the Islamic State has not acknowledged responsibility for the bombings) have taken place in Turkey—in Suruc, Ankara, and Istanbul—causing significant fatalities. Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, submitted written testimony for a February 10, 2016, House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing that stated:

ISIL's only remaining outlet to the world remains a 98-kilometer strip of the Syrian border with Turkey. Our NATO ally Turkey has made clear that it considers ISIL on their border a national security threat, and the government, in part due to U.S. and international pressure, has taken aggressive measures in recent weeks to impede the flow of ISIL

⁸ See, e.g., Alison Smale, "Turkey's Role as Migrant Gateway Is Source of New Urgency for E.U.," *nytimes.com*, November 18, 2016; Lale Sariibrahimoglu, "On the borderline—Turkey's ambiguous approach to Islamic State," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 16, 2014.

⁹ Sly, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, "Undercover teams, increased surveillance and hardened borders: Turkey cracks down on foreign fighters," *washingtonpost.com*, March 6, 2016.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Craig Bonfield, "The Turkish Economy in 2015," Center for Strategic and International Studies Turkey Update, February 23, 2016.

¹³ Information on these initiatives were provided to CRS by a Turkish government official to CRS via (1) a March 17, 2015, factsheet and (2) December 9, 2015, email correspondence. The initiatives include enforcing an existing "no-entry" list, establishing "risk analysis" units, boosting border security personnel from 12,000 to 20,000, strengthening border infrastructure, adding border air reconnaissance, carrying out zero-point checks for goods crossing the border, capturing oil stores, and destroying illegal pipelines. See also Miller and Mekhennet, *op. cit.* for a discussion of U.S.-Turkey intelligence cooperation. For information on oil smuggling from Syria into Turkey, see CRS Report R43980, *Islamic State Financing and U.S. Policy Approaches*, by (name redacted), (name redacted), and (name redacted).

resources and fighters through that segment of the border. The importance of this effort cannot be overstated.¹⁴

However, various interrelated dynamics may be preventing Turkish officials from undertaking more robust direct operations against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, including the following:

- **Possible Kurdish Emboldenment:** Turkish concerns that external support for Kurdish territorial gains in Syria is bolstering Kurdish anti-government sentiment and PKK military capabilities in Turkey, and thus undermining national stability and cohesion.
- **Domestic Political Priorities:** President Erdogan's efforts to expand his constitutional powers may be part of the reason for his recent focus on nationalistic criticisms of Kurdish militants and activists,¹⁵ an apparent departure from his previous domestic and regional approach to the Kurds that appeared to be more accommodating.
- **Possible Leverage with Europe:** European Union (EU) dependence on Turkey as a refugee and migrant "gatekeeper" may be leading Turkey to seek European (1) assistance with Turkey's own refugee burdens; (2) support for or acquiescence to Turkish domestic and foreign policies more generally; and (3) offering to Turks enhanced access to the EU and its markets, including possible progress on Turkey's EU accession negotiations.¹⁶
- **Regional and Sectarian Rivalries:** Turkish concerns that recent Syrian government and Syrian Kurdish military gains could bolster Iranian and Russian influence in the region at the expense of Turkey and other Sunni-majority countries.¹⁷

The Turkey-Syria Border

Turkey's Strategic Concerns

Turkey's strategic calculations in areas close to its border with Syria have been affected by late 2015 and early 2016 military operations by the Syrian government, its allies (including Russia, Iran, and various Shiite militias). These calculations may factor into larger Turkish geopolitical anxieties regarding (as mentioned above) the regional influence of Turkey and other Sunni-majority countries relative to the Kurds, Russia, and Iran, particularly if these recent developments play a decisive role in shaping the political outcome of Syria's civil war. Short-term Turkish concerns apparently include the following:

- Turkey's reduced ability to supply Syrian opposition militias via the Bab al Salam crossing south of the Turkish border town of Kilis; and

¹⁴ Available at <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20160210/104449/HHRG-114-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20160210.pdf>. See also a February 23 White House briefing by McGurk at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/23/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-special-presidential>.

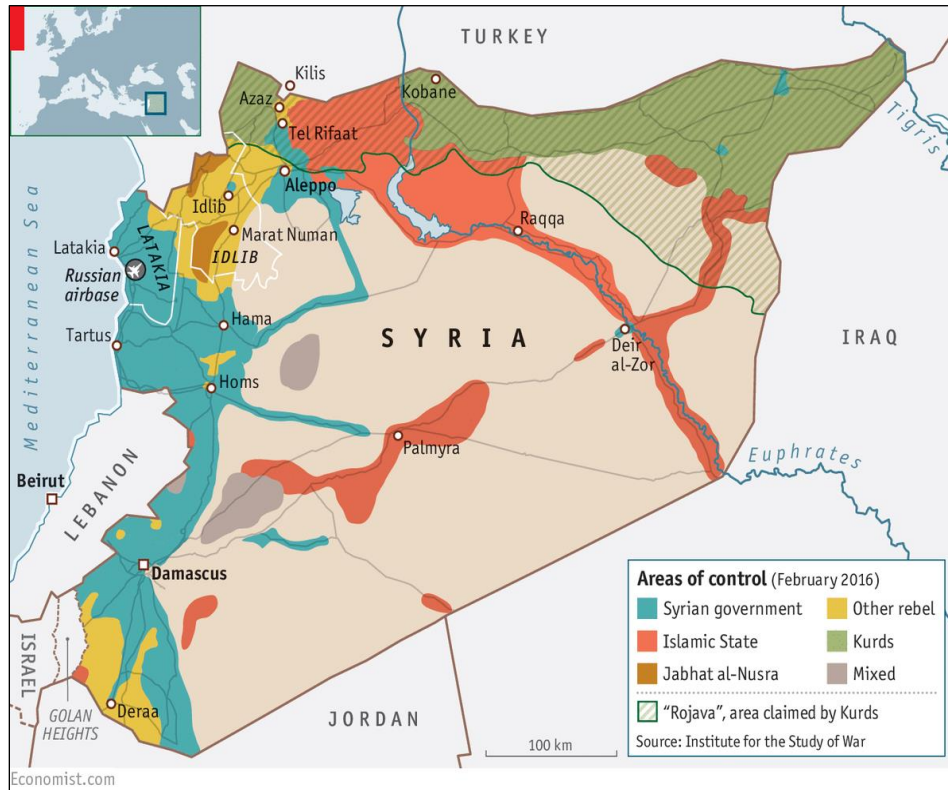
¹⁵ Hearing testimony of Nate Schenkkan of Freedom House, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats, February 3, 2016.

¹⁶ See, e.g., "Turkey's Erdogan threatened to flood Europe with migrants: Greek website," *Reuters*, February 8, 2016.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Fabrice Balanche, "The Battle of Aleppo Is the Center of the Syrian Chessboard," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2554, February 5, 2016.

- External (Syrian, Russian, even U.S.) efforts that could possibly facilitate Syrian Kurdish territorial ambitions in a key area between the town of Azaz and the Euphrates River that would connect other Kurdish-controlled enclaves.¹⁸ The leading Syrian Kurdish militia, the People’s Protection Units (Kurdish acronym YPG), is dominated by the Syrian Kurdish group known as the Democratic Union Party (Kurdish acronym PYD).

Figure 2. Syria: Map of Territorial Control
(as of February 2016)



In early 2016, Turkish artillery has periodically targeted YPG positions in or around the Azaz-Euphrates corridor, and Turkish officials have hinted that more direct military action is possible if the YPG continues operations in the area.¹⁹ Yet, most reports indicate that the Turkish military strongly opposes mounting large-scale operations in Syria, especially without U.N. Security Council backing.²⁰ Moreover, stepped-up Western intervention seems unlikely.²¹ U.S. officials have “urged the YPG to avoid moves that will heighten tensions with Turkey and with other Arab opposition forces in northern Syria,” while also urging Turkey to cease artillery fire across the border.²² In February, Turkey invited Saudi Arabia to base fighter aircraft at Incirlik air base,

¹⁸ Amberin Zaman, “How the Kurds Became Syria’s New Power Brokers,” *foreignpolicy.com*, February 18, 2016.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, citing Deputy Prime Minister Yalcin Akdogan as saying that Turkey wants to create a “secure” strip of territory roughly six miles deep into Syria.

²⁰ Sly, *op. cit.*

²¹ “Vladimir Putin’s war in Syria: Why would he stop now?,” *Economist*, February 20, 2016.

²² Mark Toner, State Department Deputy Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, February 16, 2016.

ostensibly in connection with anti-IS coalition efforts.²³ The invitation may also been part of a larger effort to communicate Sunni resolve against Bashar al Asad's regime²⁴ at a time when recent conflict and international diplomacy (including a partial cease-fire that began in February and Russia's March announcement of a drawdown of some type) may have led to greater confidence among Asad and his Russian and Iranian allies regarding their position in Syria.²⁵

The Syrian Kurds

Given that the PYD/YPG has close ties with the PKK, gains by the YPG during the Syrian conflict have raised the possibility of PKK-affiliated control over most of Syria's northern border.²⁶ Media reports from March 2016 indicate that Syrian Kurdish leaders are considering declaring a federal region for the various ethnic groups (including Arabs and Turkmen) in areas under de facto PYD control.²⁷ Turkey would oppose such a move, and it would have implications for a number of other stakeholders in Syria's conflict.²⁸ In a March 17 daily press briefing, the State Department spokesperson said, in response to whether the United States would accept a choice by "the Syrian people" to have a federal system, "I think we'd have to wait and see what the outcome of this transitional process is.... And when you say 'federal,' you and I might think something different in 'federal.' We're not interested in self-rule, self-autonomous zones. That can be a completely different thing than a federal system."

PYD leaders routinely insist that their organization maintains an independent identity, yet several sources indicate that PYD-PKK links persist, including with respect to personnel.²⁹ In June 2015, President Erdogan said, "We will never allow the establishment of a state in Syria's north and our south. We will continue to fight in this regard no matter what it costs."³⁰ In September 2015, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said:

By mounting operations against [IS] and the PKK at the same time [in summer 2015], 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.³¹

Although the United States has considered the PKK to be a terrorist group since 1997, it does not apply this characterization to the 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,

²³ Ugur Ergan, "Saudi committee to visit Incirlik base prior to fighter jet deployment," *hurriyetdailynews.com*, February 25, 2016.

²⁴ Jamie Dettmer, "Turkey Shells US-Allied Kurds in Northern Syria," *Voice of America*, February 14, 2016.

²⁵ See, e.g., Alan Cullison, "Analysis: In Pullout, Moscow Aims to Avoid Quagmire," *Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 2016.

²⁶ For information on various Kurdish groups in the region and their interrelationships, see CRS In Focus IF10350, *The Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted). Reportedly, the PYD was "established in 2003 by Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants of Syrian origin in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq." Heiko Wimmen and Muzehher Selcuk, "The Rise of Syria's Kurds," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2013. See also Jonathan Steele, "The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!," *New York Review of Books*, December 3, 2015.

²⁷ Anne Barnard, "Syrian Kurds Look to Create Federal Region in Nation's North," *New York Times*, March 17, 2016.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See, e.g., Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG-PKK Connection," Atlantic Council MENASource Blog, January 26, 2016.

³⁰ Wes Enzinna, "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 2015.

³¹ Semih Idiz, "Turkey's Middle East policy 'fiasco,'" *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, September 28, 2015.

and in a February 23, 2016, press briefing, the Defense Department spokesperson said that “we will continue to disagree with Turkey [with] regard [to] ... our support for those particular [Kurdish] groups that are taking the fight to ISIL, understanding their concerns about terrorist activities.”

While the U.S. military has provided air support to the YPG, the State Department deputy spokesperson said at a February 17, 2016, daily press briefing that U.S. support for the YPG has not included directly arming the group. U.S. officials have referred to U.S. military airdrops of arms or ammunition in Syria to non-YPG groups, including groups that associate or may associate with the YPG via an umbrella group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).³² Most media reports, however, support one source’s claim that “the YPG is the main element of the [SDF] coalition and outnumbers all other groups.”³³ Evidence of significant Turkish Kurdish participation in YPG military operations³⁴ and of cross-border tunnels³⁵ suggest the possibility that fighters and weapons have traveled from Syria to Turkey to assist PKK or PKK-affiliated militants against the Turkish government (see “Ongoing Turkey-PKK Violence and Future Prospects” below).³⁶ In a February 8, 2016, daily press briefing, the State Department spokesperson responded to a question about whether “arms given to [the] PYD” might have been used against the Turkish military by saying that “we’ve seen no indication that that’s borne out by the facts.”

In February 2016, Erdogan demanded that the United States choose between Turkey and the PYD,³⁷ and in March he alleged that weapons confiscated from the PKK and PYD/YPG have Russian and Western (including U.S.) origins.³⁸ U.S. officials have expressed their intentions to continue cooperating with both Turkey and the PYD/YPG on specific aspects of the crisis in Syria.³⁹ Media reports suggest ongoing debates among U.S. officials about how closely to work with the PYD/YPG in the context of other partnering options and the PYD’s relations with Russia and other regional and international actors.⁴⁰ In March 2016, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that U.S. officials have “made it very clear to the PYD that any actions it takes to either support the PKK or to [militarily] engage the other opposition groups [beyond the Islamic State] are profoundly problematic and we look to the PYD to act responsibly and to focus its

³² Department of Defense Press Briefings, October 13 and October 21, 2015; Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Written Testimony Submitted for House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing, February 10, 2016. For background information on the SDF, see, e.g., Aron Lund, “Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer,” January 22, 2016.

³³ Benedetta Argentieri, “Are the Syrian Democratic Forces any of the above?,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2016. See also Zaman, op. cit., asserting, “Since last year, the Kurds have teamed up with a gaggle of opposition Arab, Turkmen, and non-Muslim brigades to form the SDF, mostly as a kind of fig leaf that allows Washington to justify its support for them.” One U.S. journalist has claimed that “the SDF umbrella group now numbers about 40,000, of which 7,000 are Arabs.” David Ignatius, “A Pivotal Moment in a Tangled War,” *Washington Post*, February 19, 2016.

³⁴ Stein and Foley, op. cit.

³⁵ Katrin Kuntz et al., “Children of the PKK: The Growing Intensity of Turkey’s Civil War,” *spiegel.de*, February 16, 2016.

³⁶ See, e.g., Daren Butler, “Turkish soldiers clash with Kurdish militants crossing from Syria: army,” *Reuters*, February 10, 2016.

³⁷ “Erdogan: US should choose between Turkey, Kurdish forces,” *Associated Press*, February 8, 2016.

³⁸ “The Latest: Syrian group ‘optimistic’ about Geneva talks,” *Associated Press*, March 16, 2016.

³⁹ See, e.g., John Kirby, State Department spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, February 8, 2016.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Josh Rogin and Eli Lake, “Obama Administration Argues Over Support for Syrian Kurds,” *Bloomberg View*, February 23, 2016; Zaman, op. cit.; Charles Lister, “U.S. Must Tell Kurds to Stop Attacking Syrian Rebels,” *nytimes.com*, February 24, 2016.

efforts on the fight against Daesh.”⁴¹ Later in March, Turkey’s interior ministry blamed a deadly suicide car bombing in Ankara on a PKK member whom the YPG allegedly trained.⁴²

“Safe Zones” in Syria?

Turkey has long advocated the creation of one or more “safe zones” within Syria along the two countries’ border. To some extent, such advocacy resembles pleas that Turkish leaders made following the 1991 Gulf War for help in preventing refugee burdens.⁴³ In that case, the United States established a humanitarian safe zone with ground forces and then patrolled a no-fly zone in northern Iraq.⁴⁴ In December 9, 2015, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter addressed the case of Syria:

With respect to safe zones, ... I’ve certainly thought about that a great deal. [The] concept of a safe zone would be to create a patch of Syria [wherein] people who are inclined to go there, could go there and be protected. They would need to be protected because you can foresee that at least ISIL and other radical groups, and quite possibly elements of the Assad regime, [would] undertake to prove that it wasn’t safe.

And so it would have to be made safe. And that takes us back to the question of [what’s] an appropriate force of that size to protect a zone of that size. [In] our estimate, it’s substantial. And again, I don’t see, much as I wish otherwise, anybody offering to furnish that force.

I also think we have thought about who might want to reside in such a zone. I think it would be undesirable [if it] became a place into which people were pushed, say, from Turkey or Europe, expelled, so to speak, into this zone. I don’t know what the people who now live in the zone would think about other people coming into the zone. That would have to be taken into account, and whether other people want to live there.

[So] we have thought about it. It’s complicated. We have not recommended that because it’s an undertaking of substantial scale where [in] my judgment, the costs outweigh the benefits.

In a December 1, 2015, House Armed Services Committee hearing, General Joseph Dunford (USMC), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, equated a hypothetical establishment of a no-fly zone to declaring war on Syria.

The United States and Turkey reportedly started discussions about possible operations to clear the Azaz-Euphrates corridor in Syria of IS control and border transit after Turkey decided (in summer 2015) to allow U.S. and coalition use of its bases for anti-IS strikes in Syria and Iraq, and to join in some of those strikes. However, subsequent developments, including Russia’s step-up in military involvement in Syria in late 2015, and its apparent installation of S-400 air defense systems in Syria following the November 2015 Turkish downing of a Russian aircraft, reportedly reduced U.S. willingness to consider establishing an “IS-free” zone.⁴⁵ After the aircraft downing,

⁴¹ Fatih Erel, “US warns PYD not to support PKK in Turkey,” *Anadolu Agency*, March 2, 2016.

⁴² Emre Peker, “Turkey Links Bomber to Syrian Kurds,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2016.

⁴³ Morton Abramowitz, “Remembering Turgut Ozal: Some Personal Recollections,” *Insight Turkey*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 42-43.

⁴⁴ For information on some of those operations, see Gordon W. Rudd, *Humanitarian Intervention: Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation PROVIDE COMFORT, 1991*, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2004, available at http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian_intervention/CMH_70-78.pdf.

⁴⁵ Tara Copp, “Pentagon hesitant to commit to no-fly zone, given challenges,” *Stars and Stripes*, November 24, 2015.

Turkey has reportedly not flown missions inside Syria,⁴⁶ presumably due to concerns about possible Russian retaliation. Whether the Russian drawdown announced in March 2016 might substantively change U.S. or Turkish calculations on these issues is unclear and may depend on a number of circumstances.

Refugee Flows and a Turkey-European Union Arrangement

Turkish officials have expressed hopes that a protected zone of some type in northern Syria might create opportunities for the more than two million Syrian refugees that Turkey currently hosts—as well as others from Iraq and elsewhere—to return to their home country and to mitigate future refugee flows.⁴⁷ Various media reports from early 2016 indicate that the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation⁴⁸ has coordinated the setup of tent camps for displaced persons on the Syrian side of the Syria-Turkey border because Turkey has closed its crossings to most refugees.⁴⁹ Some observers question what might happen were these camps to face attack or impending danger.⁵⁰

Many refugees have lived in Turkey for months or years and have reportedly had difficulty accessing basic services and jobs because Turkey does not grant them full refugee status.⁵¹ Some refugees from third countries and undocumented migrants have crossed over Turkish territory to Europe via land. However, given relatively strong controls at Turkey's land borders with European Union countries, particularly under current circumstances, many refugees and migrants have opted for sea routes—especially to nearby Greek islands—on crowded boats under dangerous conditions. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than one million refugees and migrants—many of whom use Turkey as a point of transit—arrived in Europe via sea in 2015, and more than 130,000 have arrived in 2016 through early March,⁵² with higher rates of migration reportedly expected in the coming warm-weather months.⁵³ According to a Turkish government source,⁵⁴ in 2015 the Turkish Coast Guard initiated two new operations—one in the Aegean Sea and one in the Mediterranean—aimed at maintaining safety and security via rescue and interdiction efforts.⁵⁵

⁴⁶ Sly, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Jack Moore, “Turkey Proposes Syria ‘Safe Zone’ in Return for Cooperation with EU on Refugee Crisis,” *Newsweek*, September 28, 2015.

⁴⁸ IHH is a Turkish Islamist NGO. It is largely known internationally for helping organize the May 2010 Gaza flotilla, which produced an international incident between Turkey and Israel.

⁴⁹ “Syria refugee camps set up as Turkey limits entries,” *BBC News*, February 8, 2016; Anshel Pfeffer, “Turkish Group Behind Gaza Flotilla Setting Up First Refugee ‘Safe Haven’ on Syrian Soil,” *haaretz.com*, February 8, 2016.

⁵⁰ Pfeffer, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ 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. 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 profile—Turkey.

⁵² See <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>.

⁵³ Ayla Albarak, “Turkey Struggles to Stop Migrant Boats,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2016.

⁵⁴ This source was provided via CRS email correspondence with a Turkish official on December 16, 2015.

⁵⁵ According to the Turkish government source, the operations cost approximately \$65 million on an annualized basis. For some figures on Turkey-Greece migration and interdiction in January and February 2016, see Albarak, *op. cit.*

The European Union (EU) has engaged with Turkey to assist it in its efforts to deal with refugee and migrant populations while stemming or controlling the flow of these populations to Europe. In November 2015, Turkey and the EU finalized a joint action plan, which included an initial EU pledge of €3 billion in humanitarian aid⁵⁶ for Syrian refugees in Turkey (along with other pledges related to possible visa-free travel and resumption of EU accession negotiations) in return for more robust Turkish cooperation in stopping migrant smugglers and human traffickers.⁵⁷ Some observers questioned, however, whether Turkish authorities—including those with the mandate to prevent smugglers and traffickers from leaving shore—would be able or willing to control refugee and migrant flows under this arrangement.⁵⁸

Following the November 2015 summit, European leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel have met frequently with Turkish leaders in efforts to reach more specific understandings. Additionally, in February 2016, NATO announced that it would deploy a maritime mission in the Aegean Sea to help support efforts “to stem illegal trafficking and illegal migration in the Aegean.”⁵⁹ The mission seeks to increase the capacity of Turkish and Greek security and border control personnel, and improve information-sharing, including with national coast guards of EU countries and Frontex (the EU’s borders management agency, which oversees two EU maritime rescue missions—one in the Aegean and the other in the central Mediterranean between Italy and Libya). In early March, NATO announced that its ships would expand their area of operation to include Greek and Turkish territorial waters.⁶⁰

In light of ongoing refugee and migrant flows into Europe, the EU agreed in principle in early March to (1) expedite the disbursement of the aid promised in November 2015 and contemplate additional aid to help Turkey with its efforts; (2) consider allowing visa-free travel for Turks by June 2016 and opening new chapters in Turkey’s EU accession negotiations; and (3) potentially cooperate with Turkey in facilitating within Syria areas for the local population that would be “more safe.”⁶¹ In concert with these proposals, Turkey would agree to take back “all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into the Greek islands” and, in exchange, one Syrian

⁵⁶ The funding details were laid out in a Council of the European Union document entitled “Refugee facility for Turkey: Member states agree on details of financing,” dated February 3, 2016. Turkey has spent approximately \$8.73 billion on refugee needs since 2011. “Turkey provides education for 300,000 Syrian refugees,” *Anadolu Agency*, December 23, 2015. As of February 2016, U.S. assistance for Syrian refugees in Turkey since FY2012 totaled more than \$379 million. February 4, 2016, Department of State factsheet available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252113.htm>. For additional context, see <http://www.cidi.org/wp-content/uploads/02.04.16-USG-Syria-Complex-Emergency-Fact-Sheet-2.pdf> and <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html>.

⁵⁷ Council of the European Union, Meeting of heads of state or government with Turkey - EU-Turkey statement, 29/11/2015.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., “The EU’s refugee crisis: A smuggler’s-eye view of Turkey’s effort to stop the migrants,” *Economist*, February 8, 2016.

⁵⁹ NATO, Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the Level of Defence Ministers, February 11, 2016.

⁶⁰ NATO press release, NATO Secretary General welcomes expansion of NATO deployment in the Aegean Sea, March 6, 2016.

⁶¹ Council of the European Union, Statement of the EU Heads of State or Government, 07/03/2016; Valentina Pop and Laurence Norman, “EU, Turkey Agree on Draft of Migrant Deal,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2016. Merkel, in a February 2016 interview, was quoted as saying (translated from German), “In the current situation, it would be helpful if there was an area there in which none of the warring parties carry out attacks by air—so a type of no-fly zone,” after having previously criticized the idea because of difficulties involved in guaranteeing civilians’ security. Michelle Martin, “Merkel says supports some kind of no-fly zone in Syria,” *Reuters*, February 15, 2016.

refugee from Turkey would be resettled in the EU for every Syrian “readmitted by Turkey from Greek islands.”⁶²

Officials from international organizations and other observers have raised concerns regarding the legality and morality of the proposed Turkey-EU arrangement:

- On March 8, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi expressed deep concern “about any arrangement that would involve the blanket return of anyone from one country to another without spelling out the refugee protection safeguards under international law.”⁶³ Perhaps partly in hopes of addressing such concerns to some extent, the Turkish government issued a regulation in January permitting employment (with some limitations) for those Syrians who have officially registered for temporary protection in Turkey.⁶⁴ UNHCR also said on March 8 that “Europe’s resettlement commitments remain however, very low compared to the needs.”⁶⁵
- A leader of one of the political blocs in the European Parliament warned in March about the EU making a deal with “a country [Turkey] that imprisons journalists, attacks civil liberties and [has] a highly worrying human rights situation.”⁶⁶
- Amnesty International released a statement decrying the EU’s dependence on Turkey as its “border guard,” given the burdens Turkey already faces with three million refugees. Amnesty claimed that it had evidence of Turkish maltreatment of some refugees and asylum-seekers, including “unlawful detentions and deportations” and the “forcible return” of some refugees to Syria.⁶⁷

On March 18, Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu finalized the proposed arrangement with EU leaders in Brussels. The resulting EU-Turkey statement included the following passage:

All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. This will take place in full accordance with EU and international law, thus excluding any kind of collective expulsion. All migrants will be protected in accordance with the relevant international standards and in respect of the principle of non-refoulement. It will be a temporary and extraordinary measure which is necessary to end the human suffering and restore public order. Migrants arriving in the Greek islands will be duly registered and any application for asylum will be processed individually by the Greek authorities in accordance with the Asylum Procedures Directive, in cooperation with UNHCR. Migrants not applying for asylum or whose

⁶² Council of the European Union, Statement of the EU Heads of State or Government, 07/03/2016.

⁶³ The statement is available at <http://www.unhcr.org/56dec2e99.html>, and also said, “An asylum-seeker should only be returned to a third state, if the responsibility for assessing the particular asylum application in substance is assumed by the third country; the asylum-seeker will be protected from refoulement; and if the individual will be able to seek and, if recognized, enjoy asylum in accordance with accepted international standards, and have full and effective access to education, work, health care and, as necessary, social assistance.”

⁶⁴ Mehmet Celik, “IOM praises Turkey’s new regulation granting work permits to Syrian refugees,” January 16, 2016; “The EU’s refugee crisis: A smuggler’s-eye view of Turkey’s effort to stop the migrants,” *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ UNHCR’s reaction to Statement of the EU Heads of State and Government of Turkey, 7 March, March 8, 2016.

⁶⁶ Guy Verhofstadt, the leader of the European Parliament’s Alliance of Liberals and Democrats group, quoted in James Kanter, “NATO Takes Fight to Human Traffickers in Aegean,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2016. For additional information on European concerns regarding Turkey’s human rights profile, see European Parliament press release, [European Parliament President Martin] Schulz on the EU-Turkey Summit, March 7, 2016.

⁶⁷ Amnesty International, “EU-Turkey Summit: Don’t wash hands of refugee rights,” March 7, 2016.

application has been found unfounded or inadmissible in accordance with the said directive will be returned to Turkey.⁶⁸

According to one media report, returns from Greek islands to Turkey will commence on April 4.⁶⁹

Domestic Politics and Stability

Overview

Turkish domestic politics feature controversies regarding power, constitutional democracy, corruption, and civil liberties. Contentious discussions also focus on ongoing Turkey-PKK conflict with the potential to destabilize significant areas of the country, security concerns regarding Syria and Iraq, and economic issues.⁷⁰ 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, especially after the AKP, the party he founded and still leads de facto, regained its parliamentary majority in November 2015 elections (after having lost the majority in June 2015 elections). Since the November elections, Erdogan and Davutoglu have sought sufficient popular and cross-party support to enact constitutional changes that would increase Erdogan's presidential power.

During and since the recent election campaigns, the government has reportedly intimidated or arrested several Turkish journalists with a history of criticizing Erdogan and the AKP, and has taken over a number of media outlets. In March 2016, Turkey's constitutional court ordered the release of two prominent journalists from prison, though they still face charges of aiding terrorism and violating state security.⁷¹ Also in March, the government appointed a trustee to run *Zaman*, Turkey's largest-circulating newspaper. A Turkish court approved the action on the basis of *Zaman*'s affiliation with the Fethullah Gulen movement, a civil society network that had largely aligned itself with the AKP until the government branded the movement a hostile actor and terrorist group based on its purported role in a late 2013 corruption crisis.⁷² In a March 4 daily press briefing, the State Department spokesman said that the *Zaman* takeover was "the latest in a series of troubling judicial and law enforcement actions taken by the Turkish Government targeting media outlets and others critical of it." A week later, on March 11, the White House press secretary provided context for views attributed to President Obama on Turkish domestic issues (see "Overall Assessment of U.S.-Turkey Dealings" above)⁷³ by stating, "There are some ways in which we feel the [Turkish] government has not been sufficiently supportive of universal human rights—the kind of human rights that we obviously deeply value here in the United States and that we advocate for around the world."⁷⁴ The press secretary cited the *Zaman* takeover as one example.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Council of the European Union, EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016, available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/>.

⁶⁹ "EU, Turkey, Reach a Landmark Deal on Migrant Crisis," *Voice of America*, March 18, 2016.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., "The economy: Erdoganomics," *Economist*, February 6, 2016.

⁷¹ "Turkish Journalist Calls His Release From Jail 'Defeat' for Erdogan," *Reuters*, March 2, 2016.

⁷² Ayla Jean Yackley, "Turkish police fire tear gas at protesters, EU laments rights record," *Reuters*, March 5, 2016.

⁷³ Goldberg, op. cit.

⁷⁴ See footnote 5.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Despite this criticism, it is unclear whether non-Turkish actors will play a significant role in resolving questions about Turkey's commitment to democracy and limited government, its secular-religious balance, and its Kurdish question. Moreover, some observers assert that various security-related concerns—such as those involving the Islamic State and refugees—make the United States and the European Union less likely to take significant measures to check Turkish officials' domestic actions.⁷⁶ Erdogan and his supporters periodically resort to criticism of Western countries in apparent efforts to galvanize domestic political support against outside influences,⁷⁷ and some officials and pro-government media have pushed back against U.S. criticism of the *Zaman* takeover.⁷⁸

Ongoing Turkey-PKK Violence and Future Prospects

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." Since the resumption, Turkish authorities have arrested hundreds of terrorism suspects in southeastern Turkey, and Turkey-PKK violence in Turkey and the PKK's northern Iraqi safe havens has resulted in hundreds of casualties⁷⁹ and the reported displacement of around 200,000 people.⁸⁰

Turkey-PKK violence has led Turkish authorities to take emergency measures to pacify conflict in key southeastern urban areas.⁸¹ This has fueled international concerns about possible human rights abuses.⁸² The October 10, 2015, suicide bombings—linked by many reports to the Islamic State organization—that killed more than 100 people at a pro-Kurdish rally in Ankara led to renewed nationalistic recriminations and allegations that the government provided insufficient security for the event.⁸³ Subsequently, a number of events have further fueled nationalistic tensions, including (1) the assassination of a prominent Kurdish nationalist figure under disputed circumstances in late November 2015,⁸⁴ (2) controversial December 2015 statements from the leaders of the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey's parliament that may endanger their parliamentary immunity,⁸⁵ and (3) suspected PKK-linked suicide car bombings against targets in Ankara in February and March 2016.

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

⁷⁶ See, e.g., "Charlemagne: A graveyard of ambition," *Economist*, February 20, 2016; "Turkey's AK party: Another victory for illiberalism," *Economist*, November 4, 2015.

⁷⁷ 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; Eli Lake, "Turkish Leader Doubles Down on Blaming Israel for Anti-Semitism," *Daily Beast*, August 6, 2014.

⁷⁸ Ragip Soylu, "US envoy attracts ire of Turkish social media over meddling in judicial process, politics," *Daily Sabah*, March 5, 2016.

⁷⁹ Kuntz, et al., op. cit.

⁸⁰ Helicopters strike PKK targets within Turkey, *Deutsche Welle*, February 24, 2016.

⁸¹ Orhan Coskun, "Turkish warplanes strike northern Iraq after Ankara bombing blamed on Kurdish militants," *Reuters*, March 14, 2016; Kuntz, et al., op. cit.

⁸² Suzan Fraser, "Turkey's military has ended a three-month operation against Kurdish militants in the largest city in the country's mostly Kurdish southeast," *Associated Press*, March 9, 2016.

⁸³ Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turkey Fires Security Officials After Attack in Ankara," *nytimes.com*, October 15, 2015.

⁸⁴ "Diyarbakır bar association president Tahir Elçi killed," *todayzaman.com*, November 28, 2015.

⁸⁵ "Turkish government submits motion to lift pro-Kurdish MPs' immunity," *Ekurd Daily*, March 9, 2016; Mustafa Akyol, "The rapid rise and fall of Turkey's pro-Kurdish party," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 4, 2016.

have expressed desires for the parties to resolve their differences peaceably.⁸⁶ Many European officials have called for an immediate end to violence and resumption of peace talks.⁸⁷ In early 2016, some observers have called for greater Western efforts to press Turkey, the PKK, and possibly the PYD/YPG to calm tensions and facilitate a renewed domestic political process on the issue in Turkey.⁸⁸ Analysts anticipate that fighting could intensify in spring conditions.⁸⁹

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⁸⁶ See, e.g., “US backs Turkey’s ‘right to self-defense,’” *Anadolu Agency*, July 26, 2015.

⁸⁷ “EU slams PKK violence, calls for return to peace process,” *hurriyetdailynews.com*, February 17, 2016. 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.

⁸⁸ Hearing testimony of Gonul Tol of Middle East Institute, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, February 3, 2016; Henri Barkey, “Kurds are now key to a Middle East solution,” *Financial Times*, February 25, 2016; Zaman, op. cit.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Peker, op. cit.

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