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Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief

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Introduction

Turkey faces a range of foreign and domestic challenges, several of which have largely intensified since a failed July 2016 coup attempt by elements from within the military. These challenges have significant relevance for U.S. interests and the active role Congress plays in shaping and overseeing bilateral relations. Turkish leaders reportedly expect or hope for an improvement in certain aspects of its relations with the United States under the Trump Administration, but early indications are that some differences that materialized under the Obama Administration—particularly on Syria policy—remain.¹ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (pronounced *air-doe-wan*) is scheduled to make his first White House visit since 2013 (when he was serving as prime minister) in May 2017.²

This report provides information and analysis on key issues with implications for the U.S.-Turkey relationship, including the following:

- **Syria.** Turkish efforts to counter the Islamic State organization (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*) in concert with the United States, and complicated dynamics in the region involving several state (i.e., Russia and Iran) and nonstate actors, including U.S. efforts to partner with Syrian Kurds linked to the Turkish-origin Kurdish militant group PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party or *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization).
- **April 2017 Constitutional Referendum, Its Implementation, and Other Domestic Issues.** Various political and economic developments, including (1) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's narrow and contested victory in an April 2017 constitutional referendum aimed at formally consolidating presidential power and significantly changing Turkey's system of governance; (2) intensifying concerns regarding rule of law and freedom of expression; and (3) ongoing contention between Turkey's government and its Kurdish minority.
- **U.S. and NATO Strategic Cooperation with Turkey.**

For additional information and analysis on issues involving Turkey—including Israel, Armenia, Cyprus, the European Union, and more background on Syria, Iraq, Turkey's civilian-military dynamics, economy, terrorist threats, and refugee influxes—see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted)

¹ See, e.g., Samia Nakhoul and Nick Tattersall, "Turkey, U.S. on collision course over Kurdish role in battle for Syria's Raqqa," Reuters, May 2, 2017.

² After President Erdogan's declared victory in a controversial constitutional referendum held on April 16, 2017, President Donald Trump congratulated Erdogan during an April 17 phone call that also addressed U.S.-Turkey regional cooperation. White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey," April 17, 2017. The following day, a White House spokesperson explained that the President was not prejudging the referendum's outcome, but that cooperating with Turkey on security issues and "developing the relationship" would be important in any event. John Wagner, "White House defends Trump's congratulatory call to Turkey's Erdogan," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2017. In an April 17 statement, the State Department encouraged those on both sides of the vote to work "together for Turkey's future" and for the Turkish government to "protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of all its citizens," while noting concerns over whether the vote was free and fair. <https://twitter.com/ABCPolitics/status/854069417306730496>.

Syria and U.S. Relations

Turkish Military Intervention: Kurds and Islamic State

Turkey's military incursion across the border into northern Syria (known until March 2017 as Operation Euphrates Shield, or OES) began in August 2016, a month after the July 2016 failed coup. Turkey's operations in northern Syria have changed the geopolitical and conflict dynamics there, and have affected Turkey's cooperation with the United States regarding both the Islamic State and the Syrian regime of Bashar al Asad. However, some key modes of U.S.-Turkey cooperation, such as the use of Turkish territory by the U.S.-led coalition for anti-IS air operations, remain unchanged by Turkish military operations in Syria.

OES began less than two weeks after the U.S.-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—comprised of a multi-ethnic group of militias led by the Syrian Kurdish and PKK-linked People's Protection Units (YPG)—captured the town of Manbij from IS fighters. One of the Turkish operation's main objectives is to prevent Kurdish fighters within YPG/SDF units from indefinitely controlling Manbij or other areas between the Kurdish-controlled cantons of Afrin (in the west) and Kobane (in the east) (see **Figure 1**). In August 2016, U.S. officials called for all Kurdish fighters in Manbij to retreat east of the Euphrates River.³ However, it is unclear whether this has taken place; according to Turkish media reports, some Kurdish security personnel reportedly remained as of April 2017.⁴

Figure 1. Turkey-Syria Border: Contested Territorial Areas



Sources: Areas of influence based on data from IHS Conflict Monitor, and adapted by CRS based on media accounts. Other sources include UN OCHA and Esri.

³ Karen DeYoung, "Biden Warns Kurds Not to Seek Separate Enclave on Turkish-Syrian Border," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2016.

⁴ "Manbij, Raqqa are Ankara's 2 strategic targets in Syria, says President Erdogan," *Daily Sabah*, April 12, 2017.

Turkish military forces have provided air and artillery support for Turkish armored vehicles and special forces, and for ground forces drawn from Syrian Arab and Turkmen units nominally associated with “Free Syrian Army” (FSA) opposition to the Syrian regime. Some of these FSA-affiliated units have received additional external support from Gulf Arab and Western sources. Turkish leaders officially declared OES to be complete in March 2017, but Turkey continues to provide cross-border support to allied Syrian forces.

Turkey appears to view the YPG as the top threat to its security, given the operational and moral support its military and political success could provide to the PKK’s insurgency within Turkey.⁵ At the same time, the United States has partnered with the YPG because—with the possible exception of certain forces aligned with the Syrian regime—it has arguably been the most successful anti-IS ground force in Syria.⁶

This has led to a challenging and sensitive situation where U.S. officials and military commanders seek to assist both Turkey and the YPG, and also to rein them in from those activities that could lead them into direct conflict with each other.⁷ Even though the United States has provided air support for some Turkish-allied actions in Syria, it has stayed out of other such actions, either to avoid operating too closely to Syrian or Syrian-allied forces, or because of threats posed to the YPG. In April 2017, Turkish air strikes on targets in northeastern Syria (YPG) and northwestern Iraq (PKK) drew U.S. condemnation and led to the positioning of U.S. troops along the Turkey-Syria border to discourage further Turkish attacks.⁸

For additional information on Turkish concerns regarding the YPG and PKK in Syria and Iraq, see CRS Report R44513, *Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State*, coordinated by (name redacted)

Assessment

Objectives of Turkish Intervention

By launching its operations in Syria in late 2016, Turkey apparently adopted a more independent and flexible stance regarding (1) outcomes in Syria and (2) actors it can work with to achieve those outcomes. After permitting Islamist groups to use its territory to politically and militarily undermine Assad during the first few years of Syria’s civil war, while also seeking to avoid direct military action in Syria, Turkey’s willingness to pursue military operations with or without U.S.

⁵ Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, “The YPG-PKK Connection,” Atlantic Council, January 26, 2016; Amberin Zaman, “Ankara intensifies strikes against YPG, moves to arrest PYD leader,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, November 22, 2016.

⁶ Liz Sly, “U.S. Military Aid Is Fueling Big Ambitions for Syria’s Leftist Kurdish Militia,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2017.

⁷ “Syria War: US Warns over Turkish-Kurdish Violence,” BBC, August 29, 2016. In a March 2017 decision that has attracted congressional scrutiny, Turkey revoked the registration of Mercy Corps, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization that has provided humanitarian assistance to Syrians. One media source claims that Turkey “is widely seen as using Mercy Corps as leverage to get the United States to cease its support for Syrian Kurds.” Julian Pecquet, “Congress Wants Answers from Turkey on Shutdown of US Aid Pipeline to Syria,” *Al-Monitor Congress Pulse*, March 15, 2017.

⁸ Cengiz Candar, “Turkey continues its foreign policy blunders,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, May 2, 2017. Turkish officials reportedly gave U.S. officials less than an hour’s notice before attacking, and some U.S. personnel were located in the general vicinity. In an April 25 daily press briefing, a State Department spokesperson acknowledged Turkish threat perceptions regarding the PKK, but expressed concern about the lack of Turkish coordination with the coalition to defeat the Islamic State, as well as the apparently unintentional killing of Iraqi Kurdish partner forces.

help may indicate that Turkish leaders decided to accept the risks of establishing and maintaining a zone of control or strong influence near its border in order to address the following threats:

- YPG territorial gains in Syria that could undermine Turkey’s political and economic influence there and the Turkish government’s political and military leverage over the PKK in Turkey.
- IS cross-border activity that exacerbated the threat of terrorism within Turkey.
- Greater Iranian influence in the region via Alawite and Shia allies in Syria and Iraq, possibly at the expense of a Turkish sphere of influence in both countries.
- Cross-border refugee flows that had already brought approximately 3 million people from Syria into Turkey since 2011.

Turkey has vocally criticized the United States for what Turkish officials claim is insufficient support for their operations in Syria.⁹ Given the U.S. prioritization of anti-IS operations over other objectives, and the success of Russia and Iran in helping Syrian forces retake key areas in northern Syria, Turkey may have calculated that it had little to no power to compel Asad’s departure. Therefore, Turkey adopted an approach that combines military force to mitigate short-term threats or perceived threats (the YPG, the Islamic State, and refugee flows), with an openness to diplomatic dealings with Asad’s allies in hopes of shaping the political outcome.

Raqqa and Overall Syrian Outcomes

As of May 2017, reports indicate that a Pentagon plan for the anticipated operation to take control of the IS “capital” at Raqqa would bolster U.S. military backing for the SDF, and may arm YPG elements within the SDF.¹⁰ Through early May, Pentagon spokespeople maintained that weapons transfers had officially only been provided to non-YPG elements, but one media report cited a U.S. defense official saying that the YPG had already acquired sophisticated U.S.-origin night-operating gear via “other means by other sources.”¹¹

On May 9, the Pentagon released a statement saying that President Trump has authorized it “to equip Kurdish elements of the [SDF] as necessary to ensure a clear victory over ISIS in Raqqa.”¹² Partly in response to Turkish sensitivities about the possibility for YPG elements to aid PKK operations against government personnel in Turkey, the Pentagon spokesperson for anti-IS operations (aka Operation Inherent Resolve) indicated in a briefing that U.S. arms transfers to Kurdish forces would be “metered out” for specific operations, with the flow monitored to

⁹ “Russia, Turkey: US Supporting Syria ‘Terrorist’ Groups,” Al Jazeera, December 28, 2016.

¹⁰ Dan De Luce and Paul McLeary, “Trump to Tell Turkey: We’re Going to Take Raqqa With the Kurds,” *foreignpolicy.com*, May 5, 2017. One media report said that the Pentagon plan would provide YPG forces with “small arms, ammunition and machine guns.” Gordon Lubold, et al., “U.S., Turkey Boost Antiterror Cooperation,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2017. Another said that weapons provided would include “heavy machine guns, mortars, anti-tank weapons, armored cars and engineering equipment.” Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2017.

¹¹ Shawn Snow, “Syrian Kurds are now armed with sensitive US weaponry, and the Pentagon denies supplying it,” *Military Times*, May 7, 2017.

¹² Pentagon statement quoted in Gordon and Schmitt, op. cit. The statement also sought to reassure Turkey that “the U.S. is committed to preventing additional risks and protecting our NATO ally.” It further said, “The U.S. continues to prioritize our support for Arab elements of the SDF. Raqqa and all liberated territory should return to the governance of local Syrian Arabs.” To date, U.S. officials have not equated the YPG with the PKK as Turkey does. Lubold, et al., op. cit. See also CRS Report R44513, *Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State*, coordinated by (name redacted) for information on U.S. authorities to train and equip select armed Syrian groups to fight the Islamic State, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

prevent the arms' diversion.¹³ While President Erdogan and other Turkish officials responded to the May 9 Pentagon statement with strong criticism, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis said on May 10 that U.S. officials would work to address Turkey's concerns regarding security at its southern border.¹⁴ Media reports indicate that an effort is underway to bolster U.S.-Turkey cooperation in countering PKK militants in Turkey and Iraq,¹⁵ and observers speculate on the possibility of future Turkish military action (perhaps coordinated with Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga*) against a PKK outpost in the Iraqi region of Sinjar.¹⁶

Turkish diplomatic efforts and military operations regarding northern Syria since August 2016 appear to be aimed at minimizing PKK/YPG cross-border activity, hampering the YPG's other capabilities, and discouraging the United States and other actors from relying on the YPG to counter the Islamic State. Turkish officials have been unsuccessful to date in convincing their U.S. counterparts that a Raqqa offensive featuring FSA elements is a viable alternative to one featuring the SDF.¹⁷ It is unclear whether actions such as the Turkish-supported seizure in March 2017 of Al Bab (a key transport hub) from the Islamic State and the April 2017 Turkish air strikes in northeast Syria and northwest Iraq are focused more on deterring the YPG or the YPG's partners in its western (Russia) and eastern (United States) areas of control.

The complex patchwork of state and nonstate actors operating in northern Syria further complicates the situation and may contribute to indeterminate or contradictory outcomes in different situations. For example, in one case, Russia and the United States may have coordinated action to prevent Turkish-supported forces from threatening the SDF-held town of Manbij. Meanwhile, Turkey is engaging in a diplomatic process with Russia and Iran that has been interpreted by some analysts as tacitly identifying spheres of influence in northern Syria.¹⁸ As a possible result of such dealings, Turkey might claim greater freedom of action in areas closer to its border, where it seeks to halt and perhaps reverse gains made by Syrian Kurdish groups,¹⁹ while easing its support for anti-Asad rebels—especially in other parts of the country.²⁰ An announced May 2017 Turkey-Russia-Iran agreement on “de-escalation areas” in Syria may reflect Turkish interest in finding ways to reduce refugee-producing conflict while possibly also complicating U.S. air support for YPG-led forces in contested areas.²¹ How this agreement might be implemented is unclear, as U.S. officials insist that it will not affect U.S. antiterrorism efforts.²² It is also unclear how conflict dynamics and political outcomes in Syria will be affected

¹³ Anne Barnard and Patrick Kingsley, “Turkey Assails U.S. Decision to Arm Syrian Kurds,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2017. See also Gordon and Schmitt, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ “Turkey furious at US decision to arm Syrian Kurdish group,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 10, 2017; “Anti-terror fight should not be carried out with other terror groups: Erdoğan,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Lubold, et al., *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Anne Barnard and Patrick Kingsley, “Arming Syrian Kurds Could Come at a Cost,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2017. The PKK has built up the outpost since helping to oust the Islamic State from the area in late 2015.

¹⁷ De Luce and McLeary, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Philip Issa, “Assad Gains Aleppo, but Others Likely to Shape Syria's Fate,” Associated Press, December 26, 2016.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Amberin Zaman, “US move to protect YPG could push Turkey into Russia's arms,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, May 1, 2017.

²⁰ Aaron Stein, quoted in Max Fisher, “Turkey, Russia and an Assassination: The Swirling Crises, Explained,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2016; Soner Cagaptay, quoted in Fritz Lodge and Mackenzie Weinger, “An Extremely Vulnerable Turkey,” *Cipher Brief*, December 20, 2016.

²¹ Turkey had previously sought U.S. assistance to establish “safe zones” in Syria, but U.S. officials had expressed reluctance, based largely on various logistical and geopolitical uncertainties regarding which state or nonstate actors would contribute to air and ground forces, and what parameters would govern such forces' deployment.

²² Anne Barnard, “Russia Says Deal Will Bar Americans From Flying in Most of Syria's Airspace,” *New York Times*, (continued...)

by the Trump Administration's April 2017 decision to carry out a missile strike on a Syrian airfield in response to an apparent chemical weapons attack by Syrian government forces.

Turkey-Russia Relations

Some analysts posit that in light of geopolitical realities involving Syria and increasing public contention between Turkey's leaders and the West (including in the aftermath of the July 2016 failed coup), Erdogan may opt to seek closer relations with Russia, possibly at the expense of Turkey's long-term ties with the United States and Europe.²³ However, Turkey has a long history of tension with Russia.²⁴

In June 2016, Turkey began making strides toward repairing relations with Russia that had been strained since November 2015, when a Turkish F-16 downed a Russian Su-24 aircraft near the Turkey-Syria border under disputed circumstances. In advance of launching OES in August 2016, Turkish officials reportedly consulted with Russian officials—in part to deconflict airspace after a period of tension following the November 2015 aircraft shoot-down.²⁵

Certain Russian policies, such as occasional public contemplation of a greater Syrian Kurdish role in administering SDF/YPG-controlled territory in northern Syria, could demonstrate that Russia seeks to dissuade Turkey from an independent or pro-U.S. policy course in Syria. Others, such as Russia's efforts to sell Turkey an S-400 air and missile defense system,²⁶ may be an effort to more assertively place a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies. More broadly, Turkey depends on Russia for a majority of its natural gas supply, and a Russian company is constructing Turkey's first nuclear power plant.

Going forward, it is unclear

- to what extent Turkish-supported forces will hold their positions and/or advance farther in Syrian territory, either with or without U.S. support;
- what rules of engagement Turkey might establish and coordinate with various state and nonstate actors and local populations for administering areas occupied inside Syria by forces Turkey supports; and
- how Turkey might connect its military operations to its political objectives regarding broader outcomes in Syria, Iraq, and the region, and to its dealings with other key stakeholders, including Russia, Iran, and the Asad regime.

Domestic Turkish Developments

Over more than a decade, President (and formerly Prime Minister) Erdogan has increased his control over key national institutions. The July 2016 coup attempt probably contributed to efforts by Erdogan and his supporters to accelerate the timetable for the constitutional referendum discussed below. Some Turkish media outlets and Turkish officials accused the United States of prior knowledge of or involvement in the coup attempt. President Obama dismissed such accusations as “unequivocally false” and threatening to U.S.-Turkey ties. The claims may stem partly from popular Turkish sensitivities about historical U.S. closeness to Turkey's military, and partly from widespread allegations that figures loyal to Fethullah Gulen (a former Turkish state-employed imam who lives in the United States and is the inspiration for an international

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May 6, 2017.

²³ See, e.g., Maxim Trudolyubov, “Why Russia and Turkey Are Drifting Closer To Each Other,” *The Russia File* (Wilson Center), February 10, 2017.

²⁴ Soner Cagaptay, “When Russia Howls, Turkey Moves,” *War on the Rocks*, December 2, 2015.

²⁵ “Turkey needed detente with Russia to pursue Syria operation: minister,” *Reuters*, November 30, 2016.

²⁶ “Brothers in arms: Turkey and Russia cozy up over missiles,” *Economist*, May 4, 2017.

socioreligious movement) were responsible for the attempt.²⁷ Erdogan and other Turkish officials have declared the Gulen movement to be a terrorist organization and have called for Gulen's extradition from the United States.²⁸

The Erdogan Era

Since Erdogan became prime minister in 2003, he and the ruling AKP have led a process of change in Turkey's parliamentary democracy that has steadily increased the power of Erdogan and other civilian leaders working with him. They have been supported by a substantial political base that largely aligns with decades-long Turkish voter preferences and backs Erdogan's economically populist and religiously informed socially conservative agenda.²⁹

Erdogan has worked to reduce the political power of the military and other institutions that had constituted Turkey's secular elite since the republic's founding by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923. He has also clashed with other possible rival power centers, including the Gulen movement. Domestic polarization has intensified since 2013: nationwide antigovernment protests that began in Istanbul's Gezi Park took place that year, and corruption allegations later surfaced against a number of Erdogan's colleagues in and out of government.³⁰ After Erdogan became president in August 2014 via Turkey's first-ever popular presidential election, he claimed a mandate for increasing his power and pursuing a "presidential system" of governance.³¹

Analyses of Erdogan sometimes characterize him as one or more of the following: a reflection of the Turkish everyman, a cagey and pragmatic populist, a protector of the vulnerable, a budding authoritarian, an indispensable figure, or an Islamic ideologue.³² Analyses that assert similarities between Erdogan and leaders in countries such as Russia, Iran, and China in personality, psychology, or leadership style offer possible analogies regarding the countries' respective pathways.³³ However, such analyses often do not note factors that might distinguish Turkey from these other countries. For example, unlike Russia or Iran, Turkey's economy cannot rely on significant rents from natural resources if foreign sources of revenue or investment dry up. Unlike Russia and China, Turkey does not have nuclear weapons under its command and control. Additionally, unlike all three others, Turkey's economic, political, and national security institutions and traditions have been closely connected with those of the West for decades.

April 2017 Constitutional Referendum

In an April 16, 2017, nationwide referendum, constitutional changes to establish a "presidential system" in Turkey appear to have been adopted via a 51.4% favorable vote, in what possibly represents a threshold moment for the future of democracy in Turkey. The changes significantly

²⁷ On February 15, 2017, 78 Members of Congress sent a letter to President Erdogan calling for the release and return of Andrew Brunson, an American who has long served as a Christian pastor in Izmir and was detained in October 2016 and charged in December 2016 with membership in a terrorist organization, reportedly due to claimed but undocumented ties to the Gulen movement. For the letter's text, see <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/02-15-17%20Congressional%20Letter%20to%20President%20Erdogan%20on%20Release%20of%20Andrew%20Brunson.pdf>.

²⁸ For more on Gulen, the Gulen movement, and the question of possible extradition, see CRS In Focus IF10444, *Fethullah Gulen, Turkey, and the United States: A Reference*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted)

²⁹ Soner Cagaptay, "Farewell, President Demirel," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 27, 2015.

³⁰ Freedom House, *Democracy in Crisis: Corruption, Media, and Power in Turkey*, February 3, 2014.

³¹ Prior to the constitutional changes approved via popular referendum on April 16, 2017, the presidency was officially nonpartisan and was less directly involved in most governing tasks than the prime minister, and yet Erdogan remained active politically and claimed greater prerogatives of power.

³² See e.g., Mustafa Akyol, "Turkey's Authoritarian Drift," *New York Times*, November 10, 2015; Nora Fisher Onar, "The populism/realism gap: Managing uncertainty in Turkey's politics and foreign policy," Brookings Institution, February 4, 2016; Burak Kadercan, "Erdogan's Last Off-Ramp: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and the Future of Turkey," *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2016.

³³ See e.g., Oral Calislar, "A Tale of Two Rambos: Putin, Erdogan Take on West," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, December 2, 2014; Douglas Bloomfield, "Washington Watch: Is Erdogan the New Ahmadinejad?" *Jerusalem Post*, July 17, 2013; "Sending the Wrong Signal to Turkey," *New York Times*, April 19, 2016.

alter the country's system of governance, with probable ripple effects for its dealings with the outside world. The contentious campaign and close vote, accompanied by allegations of fraud and other irregularities, threaten to deepen ongoing instability in Turkish society. Assuming that the outcome holds, most of the changes will take effect after Turkey's next presidential and parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for November 2019 but could take place earlier if parliament calls for them.

Among other changes to government structure and the electoral system, the amendments will

- eliminate the position of prime minister, with the president serving as both chief executive and head of state;
- allow the president to appoint ministers without parliamentary approval; and
- increase the proportion of senior judges chosen by the president from about half to over two-thirds.

Particularly given the relatively slim margin of victory in the referendum, various observers have expressed skepticism regarding the vote's legitimacy.³⁴ Opposition appeals may come before Turkey's Constitutional Court and/or the European Court of Human Rights.

Rule of Law, Media Freedom, and Economic Issues

Under Erdogan and the AKP, and since 2013 in particular, Turkey saw

- major personnel and structural changes to the justice sector and the widespread dropping of charges or convictions against Erdogan colleagues³⁵ and military leaders amid government accusations that the Gulen movement had used its own agenda to drive police and prosecutorial actions and was intent on establishing a "parallel structure" to control Turkey;³⁶
- official or related private efforts to influence media expression through intimidation, personnel changes, prosecution, and even direct takeover of key enterprises;³⁷
- various measures to prevent future protests, including robust police action, restrictions on social media, and official and progovernment media allegations that dissent in Turkey largely comes about through the interaction of small minorities and foreign interests;³⁸
- the May 2016 replacement of former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's AKP government by Prime Minister Binali Yildirim and others characterized as more deferential to Erdogan;³⁹ and
- U.S. and European statements of concern regarding Turkish measures targeting civil liberties and the potential for developments that may undermine the rule of law and political and economic stability.⁴⁰

³⁴ See, e.g., Cengiz Candar, "Where does Erdogan's referendum win leave Turkey?" *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, April 17, 2017. The results sparked some limited street protests, and prompted a judicial appeal from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) that was ultimately rejected by Turkey's Council of State. Election observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Parliamentary Assembly for the Council of Europe produced a preliminary report criticizing the electoral board decision and addressing other concerns. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," April 17, 2017. Available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/311721?download=true>. The OSCE expects to publish a final report by June.

³⁵ Tim Arango, "Some Charges Are Dropped in Scandal in Turkey," *New York Times*, October 17, 2014.

³⁶ Piotr Zalewski, "Erdogan Turns on Gulenists' 'Parallel State' in Battle for Power," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2014.

³⁷ State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016, Turkey, updated March 3, 2017; "Turkey's Zaman: Editorial Tone Changes after Takeover," *Al Jazeera*, March 7, 2016.

³⁸ Lisel Hintz, "Adding Insult to Injury: Vilification as Counter-Mobilization in Turkey's Gezi Protests," *Project on Middle East Political Science*, June 6, 2016.

³⁹ Reuben Silverman, "Some of the President's Men: Yildirim, Davutoglu, and the 'Palace Coup' Before the Coup," reubensilverman.wordpress.com, August 1, 2016.

Many of these trends have expanded or accelerated in the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt.⁴¹ Days after the coup, the Turkish parliament voted to approve a three-month state of emergency, which has been extended every three months since, most recently on April 18, 2017. This allows the government to rule by decree. Turkey also partially suspended the European Convention on Human Rights, citing examples from France, Belgium, and Ukraine as precedents.⁴² Experts debate how the failed coup and echoes of past Turkish military interventions might influence future military and government actions.⁴³

According to one media source, “As many as 130,000 Turks have been fired from government posts since July, and 45,000 people have been arrested.”⁴⁴ Many sources indicate that the government’s actions have affected individuals beyond those with suspected involvement—or direct affiliation with the suspects—in the coup attempt, a possibility even government officials have acknowledged.⁴⁵ Amnesty International alleges that some detainees have been subjected to beatings, torture, and other human rights violations.⁴⁶

From an economic standpoint, a Turkish minister estimated in November 2016 that around 600 companies with assets of around \$10 billion had been seized; other estimates put the total value higher.⁴⁷ The crackdown, which has included sectors and firms considered important parts of Turkey’s post-2000 economic growth, has caused considerable uncertainty regarding the economy’s future, as some say governance under the state of emergency has undermined the rule of law.⁴⁸ In April 2017, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) described Turkey’s economic outlook as “clouded” due to “heightened political uncertainty, security concerns, and the rising burden of foreign-exchange-denominated debt caused by lira depreciation.”⁴⁹

After Erdogan’s April referendum victory, mass dismissals, suspensions, and detentions have continued, and dozens of nongovernmental organizations have been shuttered.⁵⁰ On April 29, the Turkish government banned access to Wikipedia.

Constitutional Implementation and Future Elections

When, how, and by whom the constitutional amendments will be implemented remains unclear. Erdogan has dominated Turkish electoral politics since 2002 and it is uncertain whether viable opposition could materialize in the next two years. However, his dominance could change if key constituencies’ attitudes shift as a result of the referendum or other factors. For example, Turkey’s

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⁴⁰ State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016, op. cit.; European Commission, Turkey 2016 Report, November 9, 2016, available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_turkey.pdf.

⁴¹ For example, regarding constraints to media freedom, see Stefan Dege, “Turkey’s Constitution Guarantees Press Freedom—but That’s Not the Whole Story,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 1, 2017.

⁴² “Turkish Lawmakers Give Leader Erdogan Sweeping New Powers,” *Associated Press*, July 21, 2016.

⁴³ See, e.g., William Armstrong, “INTERVIEW: Simon Waldman and Emre Caliskan on Upheaval in the ‘New Turkey,’” *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 14, 2017.

⁴⁴ Patrick Kingsley, “Trial Starts in Plot to Kill Turkish Leader,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2017. The firings span several government sectors, including the military, law enforcement, education, and the judiciary. The arrests include some in and out of government, including media members.

⁴⁵ Peter Kenyon, “Victims of Turkey’s Post-Coup Purge Invited to Prove Their Innocence,” *NPR*, October 3, 2016; Robin Emmott, “Pleading Innocence, Wanted General Says Turkey’s Purge Ruining Military,” *Reuters*, November 23, 2016.

⁴⁶ Mark Lowen, “Turkey Torture Claims in Wake of Failed Coup,” *BBC*, November 28, 2016; Merrit Kennedy, “Amnesty International: After Turkey’s Failed Coup, Some Detainees Are Tortured, Raped,” *NPR*, July 25, 2016.

⁴⁷ Taylan Bilgic, “Erdogan Purge Creates \$10 Billion Bazaar for Would-Be Oligarchs,” *Bloomberg*, November 13, 2016; Ayfer Arslan, “50 Milyar Lira el Degistirdi,” *Cumhuriyet*, October 16, 2016.

⁴⁸ “Turkey’s Purges Are Hitting Its Business Class,” *Economist*, February 4, 2017.

⁴⁹ “World Economic Outlook, April 2017: Gaining Momentum?” International Monetary Fund, April 2017. As of May 2017, the lira has depreciated more than 20% over the previous year.

⁵⁰ Patrick Kingsley, “Turkey Purges 4,000 More Officials, and Blocks Wikipedia,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2017.

economic well-being depends on foreign exchange and investment, and the flow of capital could decrease if international investors have less confidence in the Turkish market under increased state controls.

Regarding the amendments' impact, a U.S. analyst who undertook a comprehensive analysis in March 2017 stated that, on paper, some checks and balances would remain on the president's executive power.⁵¹ However, he also wrote that if Erdogan wins the presidency and the AKP wins a parliamentary majority, "one-man rule is very likely," and would put two major Turkish state institutions—the judiciary and the military—"firmly under the president's thumb."⁵² The more time Erdogan spends in office, the more he may be able to use his powers of appointment and patronage to cement his or his family's control over state institutions—possibly "immunizing" himself from future prosecution.⁵³

Opponents of the presidential system generally inveigh against Erdogan's illiberal turn and repressive measures, and warn that the changes could permit Erdogan to remain in office through 2034.⁵⁴ Some proponents, meanwhile, assert that Turkey is better off with a strong government focused on one clear leader than returning to past troubles with weak parliamentary coalitions or unelected elites from the military and bureaucracy holding greater power.⁵⁵

Government Measures Regarding Kurds

Under the post-coup-attempt state of emergency, Turkey's government has cracked down on domestic political opponents. A primary focus, in addition to the Gulen movement, appears to be Turkey's Kurdish minority. Heightened ethnic Turkish-Kurdish tensions predated the attempted coup, having been exacerbated since mid-2015 by renewed conflict between government forces and the PKK.⁵⁶ As referenced above, key Kurdish political leaders have been imprisoned since late 2016.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Alan Makovsky, "Erdogan's Proposal for an Empowered Presidency," Center for American Progress, March 22, 2017.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ See, e.g., "Turkey's referendum: The vote that will determine the fate of Turkey's democracy," *Economist*, April 15, 2017.

⁵⁴ Claire Berlinski, "Guilty Men," *American Interest*, April 24, 2017; Can Dunder, "The high price of saying 'no' in Turkey's referendum," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2017; Suzy Hansen, "Inside Turkey's Purge," *New York Times*, April 13, 2017. Under the changes, Erdogan can run for two additional five-year terms, and if Erdogan were to run and win in 2019 and 2024, an early election before the end of the second term in 2029 could extend his term for another five years.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., "Voting 'Yes' in Charter Referendum Could Support Turkey's Anti-Terror Fight: Deputy PM Kurtulmus," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 29, 2017.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., International Crisis Group, *Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin*, Europe Report No. 243, May 2, 2017; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Reports on the Human Rights Situation in South-East Turkey: July 2015 to December 2016," February 2017.

⁵⁷ Selahattin Demirtas, the prominent co-leader of Turkey's pro-Kurdish opposition party (Peoples' Democratic Party, or HDP), was sentenced to a five-month prison term in February 2017 for insulting the Turkish state and nation and its institutions. The other co-leader, Fiden Yuksekdog, was expelled from parliament and faces a sentence of as much as 83 years for charges of links with terrorism. Umar Farooq, "As Erdogan Consolidates Power in Turkey, the Kurdish Opposition Faces Crackdown," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2017; Patrick Kingsley, "Turkey Punishes 2 Leaders of Pro-Kurdish Party," *New York Times*, February 22, 2017. Additionally, dozens of elected Kurdish mayors have been removed from office and replaced with government-appointed "custodians." Turkish officials routinely accuse Kurdish politicians of support for the PKK, but these politicians routinely deny ties of a criminal nature.

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

- Which Kurdish figures and groups (imprisoned PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan, various PKK militant leaders, the professedly nonviolent pro-Kurdish opposition party HDP) are most influential in driving events.
- Erdogan's approach to and influence on Turkish government policy regarding the Kurdish issue. Though most domestic and international observers previously considered Erdogan to be the only Turkish leader strong enough to deliver a peaceful solution, he has taken a more nationalistic approach since 2015.
- How violence since 2015 might affect Turkey's internal stability, governing institutions, and ability to administer the largely ethnic Kurdish southeast.
- The extent to which the United States and perhaps European actors might offer incentives to or impose costs on Turkey and the PKK in efforts to mitigate violence and promote political resolution of the parties' differences.⁵⁸

Overall Strategic Considerations for U.S./NATO Cooperation

Turkey's location near several global hotspots makes the continuing availability of its territory for the stationing and transport of arms, cargo, and personnel valuable for the United States and NATO. Turkey also controls access to and from the Black Sea through its straits pursuant to the Montreux Convention of 1936. 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.

On a number of occasions throughout the history of the U.S.-Turkey alliance, events or developments have led to the withdrawal of U.S. military assets from Turkey or restrictions on U.S. use of its territory and/or airspace.⁶¹ Calculations regarding the costs and benefits to the United States of a U.S./NATO presence in Turkey, and how changes or potential changes in

Incirlik Air Base

Incirlik (pronounced *in-jeer-leek*) air base has long been the symbolic and logistical center of the U.S. military presence in Turkey. Over the past 15 years, the base has been critical in supplying U.S. military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. It currently hosts U.S.-led coalition aircraft carrying out anti-IS strikes in Syria and Iraq, and around 1,500 U.S. personnel. Dependents of U.S. military and government personnel were ordered to leave Incirlik and other U.S. installations in Turkey in March 2016.⁵⁹

During and shortly after the July 2016 coup attempt, power to the base was shut off and the airspace over it was closed to some U.S. aircraft after procoup forces were revealed to have been using the airfield and assets based there. The arrest of the base's Turkish commander for alleged involvement in the coup plot raised suspicions among some in Turkey about whether the United States knew about the coup in advance.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Aaron Stein, "Reconciling U.S.-Turkish Interests in Northern Syria," Council on Foreign Relations, February 2017.

⁵⁹ Andrew Tilghman, "U.S. Military Dependents Ordered to Leave Turkey," *Military Times*, March 29, 2016.

⁶⁰ Oriana Pawlyk and Jeff Shogol, "Incirlik Has Power Again, but Turkey Mission Faces Uncertain Future," *Military Times*, July 22, 2016.

⁶¹ For more information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

U.S./NATO posture might influence Turkish calculations and policies, revolve to a significant extent around the following two questions:

- To what extent does the United States rely on the use of Turkish territory or airspace to secure and protect U.S. interests?
- To what extent does Turkey rely on U.S./NATO support, both in principle and in functional terms, for its security and its ability to exercise influence in the surrounding region?

Figure 2. Map of U.S. and NATO Military Presence in Turkey



Sources: Department of Defense, NATO, and various media outlets; adapted by CRS.

Notes: All locations are approximate. All bases are under Turkish sovereignty, with portions of them used for limited purposes by the U.S. military and NATO. The U.S. and German Patriot missile batteries are scheduled to be withdrawn by October 2015 and January 2016, respectively.

The cost to the United States of finding a temporary or permanent replacement for Incirlik air base would likely depend on a number of variables, including the functionality and location of alternatives, the location of future U.S. military engagements, and the political and economic difficulty involved in moving or expanding U.S. military operations elsewhere.

Any reevaluation of the U.S./NATO presence in and relationship with Turkey would take a number of political considerations into account alongside strategic and operational ones. Certain differences between Turkey and its NATO allies, including some related to Syria in recent years, may persist irrespective of who leads these countries given their varying (1) geographical positions, (2) threat perceptions, and (3) roles in regional and global political and security

architectures. Turkey's historically and geopolitically driven efforts to avoid domination by outside powers—sometimes called the “Sèvres syndrome”⁶²—resonate in its ongoing attempts to achieve greater self-sufficiency and to influence its surrounding environment.

The potential for the United States to use its political relationship with Turkey to boost U.S. influence in the greater Middle East remains inconclusive. Regardless of some difficulties with the United States and other NATO countries, Turkey remains a key regional power that shares linkages and characteristics with the West,⁶³ which may distinguish Turkey 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 area.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ Additionally, as Turkey's energy consumption grows along with its economy, its dependence on Russia and Iran⁶⁶ for significant portions of its energy may contribute to constraints on some aspects of its security cooperation with the United States and NATO. Turkey engages with a wide range of non-NATO actors as part of its efforts to cultivate military and defense industrial links and to exercise greater influence politically and economically within its broad geographical sphere.⁶⁷

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. 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 under these circumstances, its economic success has driven its efforts to seek greater overall self-reliance and independence in foreign policy.

⁶² 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.

⁶³ Gonul Tol and W. Robert Pearson, “Turkey-U.S. Relations and the Next Administration,” Middle East Institute, October 5, 2016.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Kemal Kirisci and Ali Tuygan, “U.S.-Turkey Relations Under Trump May Hinge More on Turkey Than on Trump,” Brookings, November 30, 2016; Edward Harrison, “A Key American Ally in the Middle East Is the Country to Watch in 2017,” *Business Insider*, January 12, 2017.

⁶⁵ Michael Crowley, “Did Obama Get Erdogan Wrong?” *Politico*, July 16, 2016. 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.

⁶⁶ Russia supplies about 55% of Turkey's natural gas and 12% of its oil. Turkey has become less dependent on Iranian oil in recent years, but—according to 2016 government figures—still receives about 22% of the oil it imports from Iran (with more than 45% now coming from Iraq) and 16.2% of the natural gas it imports from Iran. See <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkeys-energy-strategy.en.mfa>.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., “Brothers in arms: Turkey and Russia cozy up over missiles,” *op. cit.*; Lale Sariibrahimoglu, “Turkey Begins T-Loramids Talks with Eurosam,” *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, September 8, 2014.

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