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TURKEY AND THE U.S.
**THE LONGEST TWO YEARS
OF THE RELATIONS**

KILIC BUGRA KANAT





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ABSTRACT

Turkish-American relations are again under the spotlight as they have grown fractured over the last two years. Following the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003 Turkish-American relations reached a low point, however relations between the two nations buoyed to their highest point with the election of Obama in 2008. This paper explores the ups and downs of Turkish-American relations since 2003 and seeks to explain why these last two years have brought serious strain on the Ankara- Washington relationship. U.S. inaction in Syria in particular, has left Turkey with the perception that Washington is insensitive to Ankara's national interests and national security concerns. This inaction and failure to acknowledge the coup in Egypt have put in danger the potential for a shared vision between the two countries in regards to the most significant problems in the Middle East. In this paper Kanat stresses that further deterioration of bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S. can only be prevented through the formation of a multidimensional and multilayered relationship that takes into consideration the interests of both countries.



This paper explores the ups and downs of Turkish-American relations since 2003 and seeks to explain why these last two years have brought serious strain on the Ankara- Washington relationship.

TURKEY AND THE U.S.: THE LONGEST TWO YEARS OF THE RELATIONS

Turkish-American relations have come under the spotlight again, with newspaper articles and think-tank analyses, published mainly out of Washington, about the future between these two countries.¹ Turkey is once again accused of not giving enough support to Washington's policies, particularly in the Middle East, and of trying to pursue separate and alternative policies on regional developments, and is being called to task for criticizing the foreign policies of Western nations, maintaining its relations with countries that are not on good terms with Washington, and behaving as if it is not a NATO ally. This kind of discourse – which airs more frequently when Turkish-American relations are tense, and when there are differences between the national inter-

1. For an example of new reports, see: Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, "The U.S.-Turkey Partnership: One Step Forward. Three Steps Back," Center for American Progress, March 12, 2015, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2015/03/12/108448/the-u-s-turkey-partnership-one-step-forward-three-steps-back/>.

ests of these two countries, differing views about the priority of threat perceptions, and discrepancies in their visions of the Middle East – sounds quite familiar now. To date, however, this kind of discourse has more frequently contributed to the deepening and expansion of problems rather than helping the two countries to resolve their misunderstandings and settle the problems between them. Most of the time, political power in Turkey has been singled out as the main factor behind the instability of relations. As a result, the argument that conflicts and problems between the two countries will be removed by isolating, abandoning, or punishing the political power in Turkey have become a dominant theme in these analyses and articles. Over the last twelve years, this tone has not helped bilateral relations to stabilize. Trying to explain bilateral issues concerning regional policies, with reference to developments in Turkey's domestic politics, these analyses have virtually become a source of 'external opposition' with their reductionist approach, and at the same time, have shared the impasse of the domestic opposition. This paper argues that domestic analyses of Turkish politics may not provide the most accurate description of the state of bilateral relations between the two countries.

The main disagreements between Turkey and the U.S. in the last decade took place as a result of the difficulty of coordinating foreign policies towards the Middle East and a perceived lack of sufficient sensitivity to Turkey's security interests in the region on the part of the U.S. In the last twelve years, since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, one of the most significant problems in bilateral relations has been the lack of sufficient sensitivity on the part of the U.S. toward Turkey's security concerns and interests in the region. The resulting failure to coordinate has led to different types of misperception and mutual misunderstandings of each other's policies. Particularly, in the last two years, tactical divergences between two countries regarding the Middle East have result-

ed in a larger problem of diverging perspectives and visions towards the region, and have made strategic cooperation between the U.S. and Turkey harder to achieve. Given this framework, the following paper will provide a brief overview of the relations between the two countries since the crisis over Iraq in 2003, and explicate the trends in bilateral relations in the past two years.

IRAQ AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS

One of the most important factors leading to the current atmosphere in Turkish-U.S. relations is the disagreements between the two countries that emerged before and during the 2003 Iraq War. Before this war, the Turkish Parliament rejected a motion that would have allowed U.S. soldiers to use Turkish territory to open a second front against Iraq. This rebuff led to significant tension in relations. The fact that the motion had been introduced to Parliament by the government but failed to get enough votes due to disagreements within the parliamentary group of a newly-formed government did not change the views of some analysts in the United States. What is more, a group of analysts close to the U.S. administration interpreted this event practically as a case of “treachery.” The fact that the commencement of the war began immediately after the rejection of the motion, and the difficult turn the conflict later took, further fueled the reaction against Turkey on the part of these analysts. It was argued that Turkey’s axis had shifted from the U.S. to the EU, a move which was conjectured to explain why the AK Party government opposed the invasion of Iraq.² In the course of

this relatively low-key debate over an axis shift, Turkey was accused of synchronizing its foreign policy with Berlin and Paris instead of Washington, especially during the Iraqi crisis. The worry that the rapidly proceeding EU membership process would bring Turkey closer to the EU and farther from the U.S. was frequently voiced. This debate in Washington generated very serious repercussions among Turkish citizens and policy makers alike. The Turkey-skeptic tone in Washington, the constant questioning of the reliability of Turkey as an ally, and the perceived insensitivity of Washington to Turkey’s security concerns all contributed to the increasing unfavorability of U.S. policies towards the region in Turkey.

The ongoing debate over Turkish-U.S. relations during this period assumed a more serious dimension when the “hood incident” broke out in July 2003. This incident occurred when a group of Turkish military personnel were captured by U.S. soldiers in northern Iraq, led away with hoods over their heads, interrogated, and held for over sixty hours, despite Turkey’s protests. The hood incident has gone down in history as one of the worst crises in Turkish-American relations in the post-Cold War period. During this time, the AK Party government was put under tremendous pressure from different segments of the society. A deeply negative view of the U.S. had already emerged across the world, particularly in Europe and the Middle East, due to the Iraq War. The war further tarnished the credibility of the U.S. in the eyes of the Turkish public, given that the first Gulf War had already eroded Turkish confidence regarding U.S. policies in the region. With the outbreak of the hood incident, the image of the U.S. in Turkey fell to a new historic low. As details of the incident emerged, reactions from the Turkish public increased. The U.S. administration readily downplayed this crisis and made quite belated statements that not only further damaged its image, but also put the AK Party government, which was trying to

2. Soner Cagaptay and Mark Parris, “The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Conference Reports <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-after-the-iraq-war-still-a-u.s.-ally>.”

establish positive and workable relations with the U.S., in a difficult position. This incident has since been frequently referred to in different products of Turkish popular culture, and the AK Party has long been criticized for not reacting harshly enough to the United States. In Turkish political memory, the incident took its place alongside the Cuban Missile Crisis and Johnson's Letter as one of the most confidence-damaging periods of bilateral relations.

The resulting crisis of confidence became even worse in the following months. The events following the invasion of Iraq and many ensuing human rights violations triggered a serious reaction from the Turkish public, as they did all over the world. Especially after the leaking of the photographs that revealed the use of torture in the Abu Ghraib prison, anger towards the U.S. increased considerably. Public criticism during this period began to generate serious tensions in the government's relations with the United States. As the AK Party government took a clearer stance in this area, its approach came to be called an axis shift by some analysts in Washington.

Another factor that caused great damage to bilateral relations in the same period were disagreements over the Kurdish Nationalist movement (PKK) issue. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ensuing chaos created by the collapse of the Iraqi central government, the PKK gained a wider ground for maneuvering. Turkey demanded that the U.S. take a more determined stance against the PKK due to the growing number of terrorist attacks launched by the PKK from Iraqi territories. However, the number one concern for the U.S. administration was to contain the insurgency and the resistance launched primarily by Sunni groups after the invasion. The Bush administration said that its priority was to put an end to the attacks of these groups and to eliminate al-Qaeda activity in the region, taking no action against the PKK. This, along with other perceived inconsisten-

cies concerning the U.S. administration's "fight against terrorism," and Washington's reluctance to fulfill Turkey's demands, led to considerable tension in bilateral relations. According to some analysts, during that period, the U.S. administration conducted operations against a group called Ansar al-Islam that claimed to have ties with al-Qaeda, while remaining neutral toward the PKK, which Washington classified as a terrorist organization. Both the public and policymakers in Turkey closely monitored this development. The U.S. constantly referred to its priority of stabilizing Iraq as a cause of its lack of action against the PKK. But this was not considered a valid excuse from the Turkish perspective, which viewed the PKK as the number one threat against Turkey's national unity and territorial integrity. At the same time, this apparent inconsistency contributed to an extensive transformation in the views of the Turkish public; opinion surveys and polls began to indicate a negative turn in the Turkish people's perception of the United States.³

These disagreements, all of which stemmed from developments in Iraq, dealt a serious blow to the notion of strategic partnership that had been maintained, at least on a rhetorical level, after the end of the Cold War. While the rejection of the motion by the Turkish Parliament was frequently mentioned, the question of whether Turkey is a reliable ally or not was given much emphasis. And this, in turn, drew considerable attention in Turkey. Having found itself in quite a difficult position after the AK Party's successive election victories, the Turkish opposition has frequently referred to what had been written and said about Turkey in the United States. Every critical report, analysis, or evaluation about Turkey in Washington was utilized as a tool by opponents of the AK Party in an effort to present these criticisms as the official po-

3. Look at the opinion surveys conducted by Pew during these years.

sition of the U.S. administration. This perception also contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations at the public level.

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND REGIONAL DISAGREEMENTS

Disagreements between the U.S. and Turkey during the period surrounding the Iraq war were not limited to Iraq. Several U.S. foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East coincided with Turkey's opening up to the region. And each regional crisis became a crisis in Turkish-American relations. When Turkey's efforts to improve relations with Syria coincided with the U.S. policy to isolate Damascus, another crisis in U.S.-Turkey relations broke out. The U.S. accused Syria of allowing the passage of foreign fighters into Iraq. Turkey, on the other hand, responded to the U.S. administration, saying that it expected the U.S. to pursue policies addressing the passage of PKK militants from Iraq into Turkey.⁴ Although some analysts in the U.S. have tried to ascribe the Turkish-Syrian rapprochement to various ideological causes, the visit by the ultra-secularist Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to Syria showed that Turkey's Syria opening was itself a secular state policy that was endorsed by different segments of the Turkish state.

The dialogue between the U.S. and Turkey over regional policies entered quite a problematic period from that point onward. No serious effort was made to remove tensions in bilateral relations, which had begun and deepened with the Iraqi crisis and further intensified with the Syrian crisis. The U.S. administration could not

devote much time to contemplating the regional reverberations and implications of its policies in Iraq, while struggling with problems inside Iraq. Turkish reactions surged, as some figures in the U.S. administration held Turkey responsible for the difficulties arising in Iraq, since it had not given the required permission for the Northern Front, and growing anti-Americanism in the region was ignored. This led to different reactions in the U.S. about Turkish foreign policy; the "zero problems with neighbors" policy came to be described as an 'axis shift' during that period.⁵ While one group of analysts claimed that Turkey's foreign policy axis had shifted to Europe, another group now argued that it had shifted toward Iran and Syria. The term 'axis shift' soon came to refer to the divergence between the U.S. and Turkey in general.

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Analyses in the U.S. during that period constantly focused on U.S. expectations from Turkey and on why these expectations had not been met. However, Turkey's expectations from the U.S., and particularly those about the PKK and Iraq, were rarely mentioned. Paying attention to the increasing problems arising from these asymmetrical relations, and greater attention to Turkey's demands could have been important with regard to the fu-

4. "Syria issue still a hurdle between Ankara and Washington," *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 10, 2005, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-issue-still-a-hurdle-between-ankara-and-washington.aspx?pageID=438&n=syria-issue-still-a-hurdle-between-ankara-and-washington-2005-06-10>.

5. Banu Eligur, "Are Former Enemies Becoming Allies? Turkey's Changing Relations with Syria, Iran, and Israel Since the 2003 Iraqi War," Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief, No. 9 (August 2006): <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB9.pdf>.

ture of bilateral relations. Instead, these issues were ignored, and the question of whether Turkey was a reliable ally or not was constantly asked and discussed by analysts in Washington, DC.⁶

At this point, another important change with regard to the axis shift and developments in Turkey's Western orientation began to emerge in Turkey's Israeli relations. Turkey's relations with Israel and the U.S. had evolved into a triangular relationship since the 1990s. For Turkey, relations with Israel enabled it to easily modernize its defense industry and to acquire considerable influence in the U.S. through the pro-Israeli lobby. For Israel, relations with Turkey were the only alternative to total isolation in the region. U.S. administrations were also quite happy with these relations, as two important allies in the Middle East forming a pact was viewed as a positive development for U.S. interests. Turkey's relationship with Israel has long played a crucial role in Turkish-American relations. It had also defined Turkey's policies toward the Middle East. In the 2000s, however, this triangular relationship disintegrated. As Turkey proceeded to pursue a more independent foreign policy in the region, its dialogue with the U.S. over regional policies assumed a more direct nature. Actually, this had been observed since 1998, when Turkey launched its regional foreign policy initiatives. But after acquiring a more self-confident character under the AK Party government, Turkish foreign policy normalized its relationship with Israel and prevented it from playing a decisive role in Turkish-American relations. The evolution of this triangular relationship into a regular bilateral relationship has been presented by some circles in Washington as yet another sign of an axis shift in Turkish foreign policy, since the unusual course of Turkish-Israeli relations during the 1990s was taken as the reference point.

The debate over Turkey's 'axis shift' brought

6. Cagaptay and Parris.

another approach along with it. Passionately defending the view that Turkey should support U.S. policies again, as it had done during the Cold War, some analysts concluded that this could only be possible through a change in government in Turkey. The idea that the Turkish government continued to take its legitimacy largely from Washington led to the belief that the government could be eliminated or weakened by denying it support. Consequently, rather than analyzing the causes and implications of the problems between the two countries within the context of foreign policy, an emphasis on developments in Turkey's domestic politics came to the fore again. Various analyses with the title "Turkish-American relations" focused mostly on domestic politics in Turkey, thus ignoring the conflicts of interest and divergences in regional policies that lay behind the crisis of confidence in relations. In an article representative of the prevalent approach toward Turkey in that period, Turkey was called the "Sick Man of Europe"⁷ and compared to Nazi Germany. That comparison, which came at a time when Turkey had made the greatest breakthroughs in its history in terms of democratization, can only be understood as a reflection of demands about changes in Turkish foreign policy.

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS DURING OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY

The crisis-ridden period during the presidency of George W. Bush finally showed some signs of improvement in the last couple of years of his second term. The Turkish foreign minister and the U.S. secretary of state made various attempts during that time to take more positive steps toward warmer relations. They came together in 2006 and signed a strategic vision document, entitled "Shared Vision and Structured Dialogue." In this document, the U.S. and Turkey identified their areas of common interests and agreed

to create a regular channel of dialogue in order to contain the existing problems in bilateral relations and to achieve active coordination and cooperation.⁷ Indeed, the document was very important in terms of solving the communication problem, a major issue in bilateral relations, and creating structured channels of dialogue. Although it was only signed and put into practice towards the end of Bush's term, the identification of the issues in relations and the way the matter was dealt with inspired hope for both countries.

Bilateral relations gained a new momentum after the election of President Barack Obama, who included Turkey in his first overseas official visit as President in April of 2009. During this visit, Obama addressed the Turkish Parliament and offered a new concept to define the future course of bilateral relations. According to his vision, Turkish-American relations would in the future be defined and framed with the concept of a "model partnership." Following Obama's visit, this concept has been utilized as a term to determine the future course and nature of bilateral relations. However, the picture that emerged after his visit suggests that, just like other concepts previously employed to define relations – strategic partnership, enduring partnership, and partnership for democracy – this concept was alluring but its content needed to be specified.

What lay behind the difficulties in transforming the multiparty alliance structure of the Cold War into a bilateral strategic relationship in the post-Cold War era was the 'plethora of concepts of limited content.' The multiparty alliance, which was established under the NATO umbrella around a joint defense structure, was faced with identity problems similar to that of NATO. As NATO acquired a looser structure when the collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end to the common threat perception, its

members were forced to establish bilateral and multilateral relations in order to maintain a strategic alliance on the same wavelength with the United States. At that point, however, Turkey had tried to manage its relations with the U.S. mostly through its relationship with Israel. Thus the economic, political, and strategic infrastructure required to form a strong bilateral strategic relationship was never fully created.

Of course, this problem did not stem solely from Turkey. U.S. foreign policy was faced with similar problems in many parts of the world in the 1990s, due both to the lack of a coherent grand strategy, and the difficulties it faced in adapting its foreign policy and security doctrines to the realities of the new era. As a result, beginning in the 1990s, different U.S. administrations repeatedly said that Turkey had enormous strategic importance, in the light of the experiences gained during the Cold War. Nevertheless, they failed to specify what kind of long-term, bilateral relationship should be established with this strategically important country. Ad hoc alliances and strategic partnerships had always emerged during regional crises. As soon as these crises ended, however, U.S.-Turkish relations faced downturns in the absence of needed direction. The concept of "model partnership" offered by Obama contained the same problem, although the gesture was welcomed by many. The real problem in bilateral relations was not how to name the relationship, but how to provide political, economic, social, and strategic content to support the concepts used in defining the relationship. Indeed, the first disagreement between the two countries during Obama's presidency showed that a positive atmosphere arising with a new administration in the U.S. would not contribute to strong bilateral relations unless it was supported by more practical steps.

The Tehran Declaration, which was brokered in a joint initiative by Turkey and Brazil through intensive diplomacy to help find a peaceful solu-

7. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-us-invest-hopes-in-shared-vision-document.aspx?pageID=438&n=turkey-us-invest-hopes-in-shared-vision-document-2006-07-07>

tion to the nuclear dispute between Iran and the U.S., led to significant tension in bilateral relations. Nonetheless, instead of pondering why Turkey had launched such an initiative and what vision it had of the region, many people tried to ascribe the deal, and Turkey's subsequent "No" vote on additional sanctions against Iran at the United Nations Security Council, to a shift toward the axis of Syria and Iran.⁸ Further, it was revealed that despite a change in U.S. discourse at the leadership level, America's approach to bilateral relations with Turkey did not undergo a significant transformation. This attitude on the part of the U.S. was viewed in Turkey as yet another iteration of the asymmetrical expectations and demands that had defined bilateral relations since 2003. While the security and national interests of the U.S. were deemed as urgent and crucial, Turkey's national interests were seen as having only secondary importance.

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The resulting analyses were also affected by these misperceptions and asymmetrical expectations. Although the disagreement between the two countries centered largely on how to deal with the Iran nuclear issue at a tactical level, analyses insisted that the issue represented an important strategic divergence resulting from Turkey's alleged decision to turn away from the West. However, during the above-mentioned

8. Efraim Inbar, "Turkey's Changing Foreign Policy and its International Ramifications," *BESA Center Perspectives Paper*, No. 132 (February 27, 2011): <http://www.biu.ac.il/soc/besa/docs/perspectives132.pdf>.

crisis over Iran's nuclear program, Turkey simply took a stance – just as the U.S. did – against Iran developing nuclear weapons. Obviously, a power like Iran that could rival Turkey in the region by getting stronger and having an unequal advantage over its neighbors through nuclear weapons, posed a significant and imminent concern for Turkey. A nuclear-armed Iran was clearly not in the interest of the Republic of Turkey, and there was no disagreement between the Turkish government and the U.S. administration over that point. In the following period, Turkey further clarified its stance on this issue by allowing NATO to station a radar station in Kürecik for its missile defense system. Debates on why Turkey had taken such an active approach to the nuclear issue were limited mostly to the argument about its "siding with Iran." Actually, when Turkey's actions are evaluated by giving precedence to its national interests and priorities, Turkey's approach to the issue could be understood more clearly. Turkey was opposed to a new military escalation and the emergence of political tensions in the region. Additionally, new sanctions against Iran might have a serious impact on the regional economic outlook as well as on the economies of both Turkey and Iran. As an important country in the region, Turkey considered it necessary to take steps toward facilitating a deal through mediation amid talks in Washington foreign policy forums about scenarios of a potential attack on Iran.

Two significant aspects of Turkish-American relations were revealed by the Tehran Declaration crisis. The first was that, contrary to what many expected, it was nearly impossible to get bilateral relations on track again without the establishment of a more structured form of dialogue, communication and cooperation between two states. Another issue revealed by that crisis was the retroactive evaluations of foreign policy makers. The existing Turkish government had ruled the country during six critical years of Bush's presidency. Thus, it could look at Turkish-

American relations from a broader perspective. As a consequence, the meetings held and topics negotiated were evaluated in the light of the experiences acquired during the previous six years. One of the most important experiences had been the U.S.'s insensitivity to the security priorities of a NATO ally like Turkey. Again, the human rights violations committed by U.S. troops, and the ensuing civil war following the U.S. invasion of Iraq had been directly witnessed by both the existing government and the Turkish public. For the Obama administration, which came to power in 2008, the situation was different. The Obama newly-formed administration might not fully understand the worries that had been constantly expressed by Turkey for the last six years, or Turkey's concerns about the impacts of U.S. policies in the region, as it had taken the office a short time ago. That difference in perspective, in turn, could result in some serious misunderstandings and misperceptions regarding the two countries' approaches to regional problems.

In this increasingly changing relationship, the Arab Spring caught both Turkey and the U.S. off guard. Such an extensive and transformative process was not predicted while both countries launched new initiatives in the region. Just before the Arab Spring, the U.S. administration had signaled its readiness to turn a new page with the Muslim world through Obama's Cairo Speech and, a few years before that, Turkey began to have high visibility and a considerable socio-cultural impact on the Arab world for the first time in decades. The likely impact of impending changes in the region on both countries' policies had to be hastily reassessed. Interestingly, both countries had similar reactions, especially to the mass demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt. Messages from Ankara and Washington about Tahrir Square and the Mubarak regime were more or less similar. Dubbed as "standing on the right side of history," the position was based on an assumption that developments in the politi-

cal arena in the region would evolve toward democratization in the long run. At that juncture, both countries seemed to prefer a transition to a democratic and liberal system over authoritarian stability. That consensus created space for joint efforts regarding their policies toward the region.

Meanwhile, incipient debates on "Turkey as a model country," especially in some Western forums, also came to carry special meaning for Turkish-American relations.⁹ The Turkish side kept its distance from this concept and the role envisaged for Turkey. Above all, the concept had rather Orientalist overtones and offered a system that was not deemed a full democracy by Western nations as the democratization standard for Muslim communities. Such high expectations and role assignment – similar to those placed on Turkey after the Central Asian republics gained their independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union – could lead to tensions between countries in the region and Turkey in addition to problems in Turkish-American relations when the expectations were not met. Moreover, offered with a reference to the relationship between Islam and democracy, the model was based on an identity perspective. Of course, both the Arab Spring and that concept came at a time when security priorities in U.S. foreign policy were shifting from the Middle East to Asia, a process termed the "Asia pivot." Obama's new policy, dubbed by some analysts as the "Responsibility Doctrine," involved regional powers in different parts of the world sharing the burden. Thus, the role assigned to Turkey as a model country in the Middle East in that period was quite meaningful. Nonetheless, being a model country in the region was not a priority for Turkey. What interested Turkey more at the time was how the Middle Eastern

9. Robert Siegel, "Turkish Democracy: A Model for Other Countries," *NPR*, April 14, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/14/135407687/turkish-democracy-a-model-for-other-countries>.

communities would regard its image as a country that had turned its back on them in its republican history. In spite of this history, the prevalently positive view of Turkey among the Middle Eastern public stemmed from its rapid economic development, stability, its determined and sometimes unflinching stance in foreign policy, and the existence of freedoms and political reforms.

The harmony between the U.S. and Turkey during the initial phase of the Arab Spring came to face a difficult test with the repressions of demonstrations in Syria. At the outset of the demonstrations, the two countries acted in concert and pressed the Assad regime to undertake necessary political reforms. Both countries had launched significant foreign policy initiatives on Syria in the last decade, and their leaders demanded a more orderly and successful transition in that country. For the Turkish government, Syria was regarded as a gateway for its opening into the Middle East, whereas the Obama administration considered Syria as a keystone for its main policy goals in the region, including the withdrawal from Iraq, the isolation of Iran, and a potential agreement between Israel and the Arab nations. In the initial months of the demonstrations, both Turkey and the U.S. used diplomatic leverage to try to force the Assad regime to pursue political reforms and listen to the voice of the people. However, they failed to change either Assad's course or his policies. When Assad responded to these calls negatively and resorted to arms to quell demonstrations, both countries declared, almost simultaneously, that Syria had entered an irreversible process and that the Assad regime had lost its legitimacy. There was some degree of coordination between the two countries' policies toward Syria during that time, particularly in the first year of the crisis. The messages given and the initiatives launched in the international arena pointed to a similar position on the situation in Syria. This convergence of opinions and the timing of "Assad must go" statements increased the

expectations on the part of Turkey.

With the deepening of the crisis and escalation of violence in Syria, the Turkish side increasingly felt the pressure of the conflict along its border, as a result of the inflow of refugees and the security risks inherent to the conflict. Nevertheless, despite very high expectations, the U.S. did not pay much attention to the Syrian question anymore. The Turkish government during this period did its best to convince the U.S. administration that the crisis in Syria could spiral out of control and lead to another serious humanitarian disaster in the region. However, once again the U.S. administration did not want to act decisively to take the necessary steps to end the crisis.

Part of the deterioration of relations between the two countries over Syria was also a result of mixed messaging from decision-makers in the U.S. administration. For instance, then Secretary of State Clinton's plan to arm the rebels was one of these instances in which the Turkish government and senior members of the Obama administration consulted for a significant period of time. While Turkey was anticipating a major development on the ground, the White House unexpectedly decided not to go forward with this plan, without providing much explanation. Instances such as these constantly resulted in the heightening of expectations but no policy outcomes.

Thinking that Washington's inaction throughout 2012 was due to the upcoming elections, Turkey expected President Obama to conduct significant initiatives in his second term. Again, the Syrian issue erupted with greater urgency for Turkey after worries arose over reports that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons in late 2012; these concerns deepened after a terrorist attack near the Syrian border in Turkey's Reyhanlı district in early 2013. Besides that, mortar shells were coming from the Syrian side into Turkish territory and Turkey was left to cope with the growing numbers of Syrian refugees on its own. The issue, which had begun as

a humanitarian crisis, had turned into a security threat complete with a terrorist attack and chemical weapons, and eventually became a social and economic problem as well, following the massive influx of refugees. The U.S. administration drew considerable fire from the Turkish public since it showed the same indifferent attitude toward Turkey's security concerns as it had done in the past regarding the PKK issue. When the issue was raised, many in Turkey pointed to the U.S.'s apparent disregard of the security priorities of an ally and questioned whether the U.S. was a reliable ally for Turkey.

With the blow dealt to bilateral relations in terms of tactical disagreements and mutual mistrust, the two countries' disagreement over Syria began to turn into a full-blown crisis. Although they agreed at the rhetorical level that Assad had lost his legitimacy, different views over how to intervene in the Syrian crisis, and the insufficient sensitivity of the U.S. administration, led to a difficult period in bilateral relations. By the spring of 2013, the Syrian issue had become the most important item on the agenda in relations. The initial coordination in policies toward Syria later evolved into a host of tactical differences with various strategic implications.

RELATIONS BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE U.S. IN THE LAST TWO YEARS

The failure to reach an agreement on Syria during meetings at the White House in May 2013 very seriously disappointed Turkish officials. The Obama administration did not seem to be interested in taking any decisive action in Syria, which generated skepticism on the part of Turkey about Washington's end goal. The Turkish media reported that Turkish government officials had brought with them a file about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, there was no decision taken about this issue after the meeting.

The White House welcomed the Turkish delegation very warmly and the administration demonstrated extreme care about the symbolic dimension of the visit, but Turkish side had expected more tangible outcomes over Syria. Instead, little was not much accomplished during the summit and any active cooperation between the two states remained again at the level of international organizations. For instance, a few days after the meetings in Washington, DC, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution supported by Turkey, Qatar and the U.S. that called for an immediate end to the fighting around Qusayr, a Syrian town, and condemned the involvement of foreign fighters on the side of the regime.¹⁰

While relations grew increasingly complicated because of the Syrian civil war, the outburst of the Gezi Park protests on Turkey's domestic scene generated additional tension between the two countries. The Gezi Park incident began as a local protest to the Taskim municipality's urban renewal program. However, the sit-ins and protests at the park quickly changed nature and spun out of control with the excessive use of police force and the participation of illegal groups in the demonstrations. Multiple groups emerged with different goals during the ensuing wave of demonstrations; in some parts of the demonstrations, participants continued to protest to preserve the park and oppose the urban renewal project, whereas in other parts, the events turned into an anti-government rally. Some among the demonstrators even hoped to overthrow the democratically-elected government through these protests. Especially the active support of the main opposition party and some other marginal groups turned the demonstrations into an attempt by the groups which failed to gain public

10. Nick Cumming-Bruce, "UN Rights Council Passes Resolution Calling for End to Fighting in Syrian Town," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/30/world/middleeast/un-rights-council-drafts-statement-on-fighting-in-syria.html?_r=0.

support through democratic procedures to gain power through street protests. Several attempts to appease the protesters, including statements by President Gul and meetings between Deputy Prime Minister Arinc, Prime Minister Erdogan, and representatives of the protesters, did not lead to the end of the demonstrations. Instead, during the meetings, those who called themselves the representatives of the demonstrators demanded not only the reversal of the decision about Gezi Park, but also the change of several recent government policies involving other projects, including the third airport and the third bridge in Istanbul.¹¹ While these demonstrations were taking place, the U.S. administration expressed its concerns and criticism of the use of force against the demonstrators in multiple instances. The White House spokesperson, Jay Carney, and Secretary of State John Kerry called for full restraint and a full investigation into the use of force by the police.¹² The statements followed one after another during the protests; later, members of Congress became involved in criticizing Turkey for its handling of the Gezi Park protests as well.

The increasing number of statements by the U.S. about the Gezi Park protests irked the Turkish government, especially when it became clear that some of the groups among the protesters had goals beyond the protection of the park and were in fact targeting the government of Prime Minister Erdogan. For some marginal groups in Turkey, it was an opportunity to overthrow a government that had consistently won popular elections with a great margin through protests. The Prime Minister focused on this aspect of the demonstrations as some of the protesters inspired by the Arab Spring made an inaccurate analogy

and viewed street protests as a way to change the government in Turkey instead of the ballot box. The attempt of some of the demonstrators to occupy the Prime Minister's office in Istanbul and similar attempts in Ankara were regarded as signs of the excessive goals of the protesters.

While some of the protesters were changing their goals, the constant expression of concern in Washington about the heavy-handed policy of the police resulted in the perception that the U.S. was supporting protesters who aimed to overthrow the government. The Obama administration was not very successful in conveying the message that the demonstrations needed to be peaceful and should not disturb the public order in the country. Although White House spokesman Carney underlined this issue in some press conferences, these statements came after the previously stated concerns and criticism. During this period, some in the U.S. failed to differentiate between those who were aiming to overthrow a democratically-elected government and those who had legitimate concerns about the government's policies and were using their rights of assembly and expression.

The Gezi Park crisis between Turkey and the U.S. became more complicated with the growing protests in Egypt and the Egyptian military's intervention into politics. For a country like Turkey that has a long history of military intervention in politics and military coups, this was a very familiar pattern of the tutelage system. In both the 1997 "postmodern coup" and the 2007 "e-coup," the Turkish military first took advantage of the rallies and, in some instances, even mobilized the masses and then used this mobilization as grounds to intervene in politics. Although legally and constitutionally Turkey has achieved a great deal in establishing effective civilian control over the military, concerns still lingered regarding this historical pattern.

The coup against the democratically-elected government in Egypt was a significant victory for anti-democratic forces in the region. While

11. "İşte Taksim Dayanışma Platformu'nun talepleri," *Milliyet*, June 5, 2013, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/arinc-gostericilerin/siyaset/detay/1718886/default.htm>.

12. Terry Atlas and Nicole Gaouette, "Erdogan Risks Roiling U.S.-Turkey Ties with Crackdown," *Bloomberg Business*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-06-04/erdogan-risks-roiling-u-s-turkey-ties-with-crackdown>.

Turkey reacted critically to the military intervention in Egypt, it expected Western democracies to likewise be “on the right side of the history” again. However, Turkey’s expectations were not met and most of Western countries, including the U.S., decided not to respond significantly to the overthrow of Egypt’s democratically-elected government. For many in Turkey, this marked another familiar pattern of U.S. behavior. In recent decades, the lack of a significant response on the part of the U.S. to various military interventions had been interpreted as tacit support for the coups. In one of the interviews, Kenan Evren, the architect of the 1980 military coup in Turkey, which could be regarded as the most significant military intervention in Turkish history, stated that the U.S. and other Western nations supported the coup; in his first visit to Turkey after the coup, then Secretary of State Alexander Haig told Evren that the Turkish military intervention was overdue. Under the circumstances surrounding the upheaval in Egypt, the political memory of the Turkish government was revived and the U.S. reluctance to use “c” word to describe the Egyptian coup was interpreted differently by the Turkish public and policy makers.

The military coup in Egypt had another important dimension for U.S.-Turkish relations. The unwillingness of the U.S. administration to call the military’s intervention a “coup” created a source of friction between the two countries’ visions of the Middle East. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, the two NATO allies had taken a similar approach to the changes in the Arab world. The U.S. seemed to give up endorsing the stability that authoritarian regimes had previously provided, in the interest of supporting increased liberties and democracy; Turkey, after many years of a non-interference policy in the politics of the region, was very straightforward in its support for the people’s movements in the Middle East. Especially in regards to Egypt, both countries took similar positions about the Mubarak regime almost simulta-

neously. However, two years after the revolutions, when the military overthrew the Morsi government, the U.S. administration started to go back to its default settings and practically turned a blind eye to not only the military intervention but also to the atrocities following the peaceful protests of Morsi supporters. Although the U.S. ambassador in Cairo stressed the necessity of using democratic processes and mechanisms instead of street protests in the early days of the demonstrations and military intervention, the administration in Washington was very cautious in its language towards the military. More ominously, Secretary of State John Kerry later stated that the military in Egypt was “restoring democracy.” In fact, while Turkey resisted acknowledging the legitimacy of the military regime, the U.S. administration started to meet with the leaders of the junta just days after the blood bath on the streets of Egypt. This discrepancy demonstrated the beginning of a significant divergence in the perspectives of the two countries about the future of the region and the state of democracy in the Middle East.

The increasing number of statements by the U.S. about the Gezi Park protests irked the Turkish government, especially when it became clear that some of the groups among the protesters had goals beyond the protection of the park and were in fact targeting the government of Prime Minister Erdogan.

It is important to realize that for Prime Minister Erdogan there was also a personal dimension to the U.S.’s lack of reaction against the coup in Egypt: military coups had a special meaning for the Prime Minister Erdogan. In the preceding two decades, Erdogan was first deposed from his position as the mayor of Istanbul and imprisoned

as a result of the military coup taking place following the street protests; subsequently, his goal of becoming president was hampered by another military memorandum in 2007. Thus, he was particularly sensitive to military interventions in democratizing countries. It was a political as well as personal issue for him.

For Turkey, the U.S.'s position marked a return to its old approaches toward the Middle East, which valued the stability of authoritarian regimes more highly than political reform and democratization. Viewing the position of the U.S. as a serious setback for the democratization of the Middle East, Erdogan constantly called for Western democracies, particularly the U.S., to act throughout the crisis in Egypt. The Turkish government warned that if the backlash against democratization was not stopped or prevented, it could spread throughout the region and embolden other authoritarian leaders. This divergence of perspective was a serious break in the two countries' visions of the Middle East. In fact, although some in the U.S. interpreted Turkey's position towards Egypt as a sign of support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey's reaction has more to do with its own experiences with coups as well as the indifference of the U.S. to the military's removal of a democratically-elected government. The Turkish government, which faced the military's latest attempt to intervene in politics just six years ago, was also concerned about the rise of such proclivities in neighboring countries and closely followed the tacit approval of the military coup in Egypt. The meaning and perception of Washington's position for the Turkish public and politicians were more complicated than was often surmised in U.S. policy circles.

Another major source of divergence in the approaches of the U.S. and Turkey towards the Middle East took place as a result of the chemical attacks by the Assad regime in Syria. The Turkish government and independent sources alike raised the issue of the regime's use of chem-

ical weapons against civilians months before it was reported by U.S. security agencies. In response to the increasing number of reports in August 2012, President Obama declared that the movement or use of chemical weapons was "the red line" for his administration.¹³ Everybody thought it was deterrent enough for the president of the U.S. to draw such a red line and expected the use of chemical weapons to change the calculus of the U.S. administration, as the President had indicated. However, when the news broke out from different sources that the Syrian regime had started to use chemical weapons. The graphic pictures documenting the aftermath of the attacks resulted in a serious response from the international community. The Turkish government, like many other governments around the world, expected the attack to drastically change U.S. inaction on Syria. On the one hand, the chemical attacks by a regime, which shares a 900 km border with Turkey, seriously endangered Turkey's national security. On the other hand, on humanitarian grounds, the attacks took the level of atrocity to a new height and paved the way for further casualties. It was also certain to lead to a new wave of refugees flowing from Syria to neighboring countries.

The crisis in Syria had already led to a divergence of opinions between Turkey and the U.S. even before the chemical attacks. Just like in Egypt, both countries took similar positions at the beginning of the crisis. Both countries tried to pressure the Assad regime to reform the political system, and when Assad continued to kill demonstrators, both countries declared almost simultaneously that Assad had no legitimacy. However, following these statements, President Obama changed his position and preferred to issue declarations of denouncement instead of

13. Shawna Thomas, "Obama draws 'red line' for Syria on chemical and biological weapons," *NBC News*, August 20, 2012, http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/08/20/13379062-obama-draws-red-line-for-syria-on-chemical-and-biological-weapons.

taking any further steps in regards to Syria. As the atrocities committed by the regime grew, the Syrian crisis resulted in a humanitarian disaster that started to influence neighboring countries including Turkey, a security risk that endangers the lives of people living along the borders of Syria, and a threat to international security through the use of weapons of mass destruction. While the threats emanating from the Syrian crisis were multiplying for Turkey, the U.S. administration became more and more indifferent to the crisis.

Following the use of chemical weapon by the Syrian regime, the issue reached a critical juncture. The Turkish government expected decisive action from the U.S. and expressed that it would provide the necessary support for a potential military intervention from the beginning of the discussions on the use of force. The use of chemical weapons was not only a breach of international norms, but also a serious threat for the Turkish people and to the region as a whole. In addition, the breach of this “red line” without any consequences would certainly give a green light to the Assad regime to continue killing innocent civilians through conventional means. However, despite the very high expectations deriving from these contingencies, the vagueness of the President’s statements started to disappoint Turkey in the final days of August 2014. First, the decision of the President to ask for Congressional approval and then to change his mind as a result of a Russian initiative without further consultation with U.S. allies resulted in a serious crisis of confidence and trust in bilateral relations. According to many analysts in Turkey, this downshift came as yet another sign that the U.S. did not take into consideration the concerns, security and priorities of its allies in the region. For many in Turkey, it was quickly becoming clear that the U.S. had no clear strategy for Syria. The lack of a well-defined direction for U.S. policy generated concerns about the future of any U.S. strategy in the region. When former members of

the Obama administration started to write their memoirs and accounts of Obama’s Syria policy, many in Turkey realized that regardless of what happens on the ground or to U.S. allies in the region, the President and his close advisers were unwilling to take any further steps in Syria. The expression of concern by Prime Minister Erdogan and other allies in the region did not have any impact, and from the memoirs of the former participants in the decision making process, it was clear that further attempts by the Turkish government would not change U.S. policy on Syria. Although U.S. policy makers emphasized that there was a strategic convergence but tactical divergence between Turkey and the U.S. in different instances, the failure to resolve these tactical divergences made it difficult to protect and preserve areas of strategic convergence.¹⁴

Both the coup in Egypt and Syria’s use of chemical weapons derailed the potential for a shared vision between the two countries in regards to the most significant problems in the Middle East. There was an increasing frustration in Turkey about the uncertainty surrounding the U.S.’s position on significant developments in the region. The rise of ISIS and the deterioration of the Syrian civil war during this period of uncertainty and indecisiveness, particularly given President Obama’s statements about ISIS in early 2014 and the fall of Mosul in northern Iraq, added to the complexity.¹⁵ Although some in the U.S. tried to spin Mosul’s fall as a failure of Turkish intelligence, it was clear that the U.S. administration had not expected ISIS to achieve such a swift victory in Iraq despite earlier warnings. ISIS took hostages following the fall of Mo-

14. “Alliance with Turkey absolutely vital, says senior U.S. diplomat,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 14, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/alliance-with-turkey-absolutely-vital-says-senior-us-diplomat.aspx?pageID=549&nID=57904&NewsCatID=358>.

15. David Remnick, “Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with President Obama,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2>.

sul, including the Turkish Consulate General in Mosul and several other Turkish citizens. While Turkey was dealing with this crisis, some in the U.S. started to criticize Turkey's unwillingness to cooperate against ISIS. During this period, Turkey was trying to save the lives of the hostages, while also emphasizing that the root of the ISIS problem lay in the situation in Syria and that without a comprehensive solution for the civil war, airstrikes against ISIS targets would only be the equivalent of a band-aid for a bullet wound.

The skepticism that arose about the commitment of the Obama administration to its messages and promises led Ankara to be more cautious about the actions of the U.S. against the ISIS.

With the killing of two U.S. hostages by ISIS and the increasing debates about foreign fighters, ISIS became a more serious national security threat for the United States. Thus, the U.S. wanted Turkey to bandwagon its policy to that adopted by an international coalition against ISIS, but Turkey wanted its national security concerns and priorities to be taken into account by the U.S. administration. Naturally, Turkey recognized ISIS as a terrorist organization and was concerned about the rise of such an organization alongside the Turkish-Syrian border. In several other instances of civil war and insurgency in the region, the Turkish security establishment had recognized the potential threats of these organizations to regional security. Moreover, ISIS had inflicted very significant damage on Syrian opposition groups throughout 2014 and many on the ground recognized ISIS as an organization that works for the destruction of the opposition and as leverage for the Assad regime. Considering these significant, direct threats to

Turkey, the Turkish government argued that dealing with these organizations would necessitate a strategy that would end the grassroots support for ISIS in different regions and eliminate the group's recruitment base. This could only be achieved through the adoption of a successful campaign that would entail the formation of a more inclusive government in Baghdad and the elimination of the regime in Damascus, which fuels ethnic and sectarian clashes among different groups. Although the U.S. administration had stated earlier that Assad has no legitimacy, the U.S. nonetheless insisted that the focus should first be on the elimination of ISIS from the region and then a political solution for the Assad regime. However, it was not clear to Turkey and other U.S. allies what a political solution would entail. The lack of confidence in U.S. policy, which grew after the "red line" statement, ensured that Turkish policy makers would not simply bandwagon to a strategy designed under the leadership of the U.S. administration with a single goal of eliminating ISIS. The skepticism that arose about the commitment of the Obama administration to its messages and promises led Ankara to be more cautious about the actions of the U.S. against the ISIS. Furthermore, President Obama's statements in the final days of August 2014 demonstrated that the U.S. had not formulated a serious strategy designed to handle the ISIS crisis.¹⁶

While serious misunderstandings and miscommunications continued between the two countries in regard to fighting against ISIS, the terrorist group's advance on the city of Kobane in northern Syria led to one of the most difficult periods in U.S.-Turkey relations since the beginning of Obama's presidency. First of all, ISIS's attack on Kobane was another surprise for both countries and there was not much preparation

16. Dave Boyer, "Obama confesses: 'We don't have a strategy yet' for Islamic State," *The Washington Times*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/28/obama-admits-isis-dilemma-we-dont-have-strategy-ye/?page=all>.

on the part of either side on how to handle such a scenario. Secondly, for Turkey, the Kobane crisis was part of the problem in Syria; the Kurdish groups that controlled this town did not cooperate with Turkey and had not taken into account the sensitivities of the Turkish government from the beginning of the crisis. In several different instances, the Turkish government warned the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) leadership then in control of Kobane that Turkey has important sensitivities; however, these warnings have never changed the attitudes of the PYD. More significantly, the PYD itself is recognized in Turkey as a terrorist organization, and does not shy away from calling itself an offshoot of the PKK. Thirdly, it was not clear why Kobane was so strategically important in the international effort to fight ISIS. At some point, even Secretary Kerry stated that the town did not have much strategic significance.¹⁷ Finally, due to the fear of the atrocities committed by ISIS, nearly the entire population of Kobane escaped to Turkey through the Mursitpinar border post. In the days after the initial attack on Kobane, the residents of Kobane and other towns in adjacent regions, some 180,000 people, sought refuge in Turkey. There were not any civilians left in this area in the initial days of the attack. So for Turkey, all that was left in Kobane was two armed groups fighting to control the town. Both groups were recognized as terrorist organizations, both were resistant to contributing to peace and stability in Syria, and both were acting against Turkish interests in the region.

During the conflict in Kobane, a series of criticisms sprang up in the U.S. media about Turkey's position. However, for Turkey, it was not very clear what the U.S.-led international coalition was trying to do in regards to Kobane or

ISIS, and what was expected of Turkey. According to many analysts, the U.S. was trying to take a symbolic step in the fight against ISIS, but on the Turkish side symbolic steps without a more serious follow-up were considered insufficient to resolve the conflict or to fight against ISIS. Nevertheless, the U.S. was eager to present the fight in Kobane as a major pillar of its strategy against ISIS. During this period, what contributed the most to the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the U.S. were the statements made by senior White House officials about Turkey and its position on the Kobane crisis. While high-ranking officials on both sides were meeting frequently to discuss the fight against ISIS, major news outlets in the U.S. released stories based on the statements of some senior White House officials. According to these news agencies, the officials expressed "growing exasperation with Turkey's refusal to intervene, either with its own military or with direct assistance to Syrian Kurdish fighters battling the militants."¹⁸ The New York Times also reported, "The Obama administration was frustrated by what it regards as Turkey's excuses for not doing more militarily."¹⁹ A senior official told The New York Times, "There's growing angst about Turkey dragging its feet to act to prevent a massacre less than a mile from its border."²⁰ Similar reports were also printed in The Washington Post in the following days.²¹ After Washington's inaction in Syria for the preceding three years, the statements that were leaked to major news outlets in regards to

17. "Kerry: Saving Kobane not part of strategy," *Aljazeera*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/10/kerry-saving-kobane-not-part-strategy-2014101223481559892.html>.

18. Karen DeYoung, "U.S. frustration rises as Turkey withholds military help from besieged Kobane," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-frustration-rises-as-turkey-withholds-military-help-from-besieged-kobane/2014/10/08/311cb190-4f0e-11e4-babe-e91da079cb8a_story.html.

19. Mark Landler, Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, "Turkish Inaction on ISIS Advance Dismays the U.S.," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/08/world/middleeast/isis-syria-coalition-strikes.html?_r=0.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

the “frustration” of the U.S. administration seriously angered Turkey. Meanwhile, some analyses writing on the issue again used identity-based arguments and accused Turkey of supporting the Islamists against the Kurdish nationalists.

These mixed messages from the U.S. confused many in Turkey about the Obama administration’s end goal. For Turkey, the reaction of the U.S. administration was not intended to stop a humanitarian catastrophe since there were no civilians left in the town. More significantly, there was not much of a reaction from the U.S. when the Assad regime launched a major offensive in Aleppo during the same period, a move which could lead to a humanitarian disaster. Secondly, it was not very clear what was expected of Turkey. Turkey had acted with restraint and had avoided taking direct military action in Syria, even when the Syrian regime shot down its jet in June of 2012. Now, in the midst of the Kobane crisis, to expect the Turkish military to become involved in the conflict was extremely unrealistic. Specifically, intervening in the conflict via ground troops, which the U.S. had been avoiding for the last four years, would be extremely difficult. Thirdly, the disagreement between Turkey and the U.S. about ISIS and the Syrian conflict started to deteriorate further as a result of the Kobane crisis. For Turkey, ISIS was a symptom and a consequence of the situation in Syria and without a comprehensive strategy to deal with the Assad regime, it would be impossible to eradicate it and other groups like it. For the U.S., ISIS was a threat that needed to be dealt with separately from the Syrian problem. The U.S.’s security priority was to oppose ISIS, and the Obama administration expected the Turkish government to accept Washington’s priorities without responding reciprocally to Ankara’s concerns. On top of that, the U.S., despite Turkey’s protests and opposition, provided military assistance to the PYD, a group that was recognized as a terrorist organization by the Turkish government. Everybody

knew that parachuting military assistance would not significantly change the balance of power on the ground, but the fact that Turkey’s concerns were not recognized by the U.S. administration was a major problem for bilateral relations.

CONCLUSION

Since the Kobane crisis, Turkey and the U.S. have tried to resolve some of their coordination and cooperation problems in regards to ISIS and tried to forge a working relationship to address Syria and Iraq. Both countries are aware that prolonging their tactical divergences has the potential to damage their strategic partnership. In the last few months, despite some confusing statements from U.S. officials about the possibility of a solution with Assad,²² the two countries seem to have reached a new understanding in regards to the crisis in the region. Intelligence cooperation on foreign fighters seems to be moving forward as well. However, given the fluidity of the situation, both countries need to continue to find ways to coordinate their policies. As mentioned above, the number of problems in the region makes it impossible for a single state to resolve them properly, and requires an international endeavor with the participation of multiple state and stakeholders. In particular, the crises in Iraq and Syria demand Turkey’s active contribution to any efforts to resolve them.

The strategic nature of the Turkish-U.S. alliance necessitates the development of a pattern and mechanism of interaction in order to reduce miscommunication, misperception and misunderstanding. It also requires taking into account the security and national interest concerns of both countries during periods of regional crisis. Any insensitivity in regard to these issues harms the mutual trust and results in an increasing de-

22. Jeremy Diamond, “John Kerry: U.S. must eventually negotiate with Assad,” *CNN*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/15/politics/john-kerry-negotiate-assad-syria/>.

gree of skepticism. The deterioration of bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S. can be prevented through the formation of a multidimensional and multilayered relationship that takes into consideration the interests of both countries. At this point, several confidence-building measures and positive steps to diversify the nature of bilateral relations, such as strengthening economic relations and increasing social-cultural interactions will be the biggest stabilizers for the future of relations. Moreover, the establishment of effective channels of communications between the different institutions of the two countries will be critical for minimizing misperceptions on both sides and a more effective means of conveying the different countries' sensitivities to one another.

For the last ten years, some analyses of Turkish-American relations, in particular those that try to explain Turkey's foreign policy through an identity lens, not only fail to understand Turkey's concerns, national threat perceptions and national security priorities, but also spread a perception in Turkey that the reports are the official views of the White House and the U.S. administration. Analyses that are more balanced and that can provide recommendations for the two countries to minimize misunderstandings will be critical in building public support for bilateral relations.

Finally, it is important to understand that part of the issue in the ups and downs of U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations is the result of the changing perception of the role of the U.S. in the world. Although the question of the "reliability of Turkey" as an ally has become a favorite title for panels and commentaries in Washington, "the reliability of Washington" is questioned even more in Ankara and other capitals of U.S. allies around the world. Just like the U.S.'s rela-

tions with its allies in different parts of the world, its relations with Turkey have suffered due to the changing international system, regional transformations and fluctuations in the perception of the role of the United States. There is an increasing degree of skepticism in different capitals about the commitment of the U.S. to its promises and messages; the U.S. needs to understand the ramifications of its confusing messages for bilateral trust and confidence.

Of course in the future, relations between the two countries, U.S. commitment and interest in the Middle East will be the key issue area. In the last two years, the chemical weapons issue in Syria, the coup in Egypt, and the problems that arose during and after the Kobane crisis have confused many in Turkey and generated question marks about the vision and strategy of the United States towards the Middle East. Since both the Syrian crisis and the threat of ISIS will necessitate long-term solutions, clarity of vision and clear goals, foreign policy makers on both sides will have to handle the crisis of confidence and take effective confidence-building measures. The damage to relations over the past two years is repairable, but it also necessitates a re-evaluation and reorganization of bilateral ties through a multidimensional and multilayered strategy. The last two years have demonstrated that U.S.-Turkey relations will remain strategic if the two countries can form a partnership that is based on the recognition of different interests and concerns, while exploring new areas of cooperation and coordination both in the Middle East and elsewhere, including Central Asia. The Ukrainian crisis, the Iranian nuclear deal, the conflict in Iraq and Yemen, and developments in Cyprus will all demonstrate that the two countries need to work together for stability and peace in the region.

Turkish-American relations are again under the spotlight as they have grown fractured over the last two years. Following the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003 Turkish-American relations reached a low point, however relations between the two nations buoyed to their highest point with the election of Obama in 2008. This paper explores the ups and downs of Turkish-American relations since 2003 and seeks to explain why these last two years have brought serious strain on the Ankara- Washington relationship. U.S. inaction in Syria in particular, has left Turkey with the perception that Washington is insensitive to Ankara's national interests and national security concerns. This inaction and failure to acknowledge the coup in Egypt have put in danger the potential for a shared vision between the two countries in regards to the most significant problems in the Middle East. In this paper Kanat stresses that the further deterioration of bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S. can only be prevented through the formation of a multidimensional and multilayered relationship that takes into consideration the interests of both countries.



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