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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 unclear on whether significant changes are forthcoming.¹

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 non-state 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 and Other Domestic Issues.** Various political and economic developments, including (1) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's controversial initiative toward formally consolidating power and significantly changing Turkey's system of governance via a constitutional referendum scheduled for April 16, 2017; (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 Jim Zanotti.

Syria and U.S. Relations

Ongoing Turkish Military Intervention: Kurds and Islamic State

Turkey's military incursion across the border into northern Syria (known as Operation Euphrates Shield, or OES) began in August 2016, a month after the July 2016 failed coup. The operation has changed the geopolitical and conflict dynamics in that area, and has affected Turkey's cooperation with the United States regarding both the Islamic State and the Syrian regime of Bashar al Asad.

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

¹ See, e.g., Felicia Schwartz, "Turkey Pins Hopes on Trump for Warmer U.S. Relations," *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2017.

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.² However, it is unclear whether this has taken place; some Kurdish security personnel reportedly remained as of early March.³

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.

OES features Turkish 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.

Some key modes of U.S.-Turkey cooperation remain unchanged by OES, such as the use of Turkish territory by the U.S.-led coalition for anti-IS air operations.

² Karen DeYoung, “Biden Warns Kurds Not to Seek Separate Enclave on Turkish-Syrian Border,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2016.

³ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, “Pentagon Plan to Seize Raqqa Calls for Significant Increase in U.S. Participation,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2017.

However, even though the United States has provided air support for some actions taken as part of OES, it has not provided air support to other Turkish-supported actions, either to avoid operating too closely to Syrian or Syrian-allied forces, or because of threats posed to the YPG.⁴ 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 very 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 U.S. officials may be open to a situation where Russian-backed Syrian government forces move into Manbij and other areas, based on apparent U.S. hopes that Turkey will be more accepting of these forces' presence west of the Euphrates than that of the YPG.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 Jim Zanotti.

Assessment

Objectives of Turkish Intervention

By launching OES, 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 OES with or without U.S. 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.

⁴ Amberin Zaman, "US Backs Turkish Offensive with Airstrikes Around al-Bab," *Al Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 18, 2017.

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 non-governmental 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 *Ibid.*

- 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. In January 2017, officials from Turkey reached initial understandings with Russian and Iranian officials intended to stem violence in Syria.¹⁰ Although the understandings have had limited practical effect, they have been interpreted by some analysts as tacitly identifying spheres of influence in northern Syria.¹¹ 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, while easing its support for anti-Asad rebels—especially in other parts of the country.¹²

In early 2017, Turkish military officials reportedly proposed to U.S. and Russian officials the idea of establishing some kind of designated areas in northern Syria between Afrin and Kobane (these areas have been commonly referred to in the media as “safe zones” but their military and humanitarian characteristics remain largely unclear).¹³ This Turkish proposal—perhaps partly motivated by Trump Administration comments regarding possible consideration of safe zones—and previous Turkish proposals from 2015 appear to some extent to share the objectives of protecting civilians and minimizing the flow of refugees and migrants from Syria into Turkey. However, this proposal may be motivated by geographical containment of the YPG more than previous proposals that contemplated possible anti-Asad training and operations.¹⁴ With Turkish-supported forces now on the ground in much of the territory that would appear to fall within these designated areas, Turkey's capacity to defend, patrol, and provide amenities to such areas may be more credible than before. However, specific operational details of this Turkish proposal remain largely unclear; complications regarding U.S. partnership with the YPG persist; and Russian and Syrian officials reportedly remain unenthusiastic about any such proposals.¹⁵

Raqqah and Overall Syrian Outcomes

As of March 2017, reports indicate that a Pentagon plan for the anticipated operation to take control of the IS “capital” at Raqqah would bolster U.S. military backing for the SDF, and may contemplate directly arming YPG elements within the SDF (to this point, U.S. officials maintain

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

¹⁰ Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, “Syria Deal Draws Iran into Alliance with Russia and Turkey,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 2017.

¹¹ Philip Issa, “Assad Gains Aleppo, but Others Likely to Shape Syria's Fate,” Associated Press, December 26, 2016.

¹² 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.

¹³ Jamie Dettmer, “Turkey Pushes Syria Safe Zones,” *Voice of America*, March 8, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid; Liz Sly, “Turkey's Erdogan wants to establish a safe zone in the ISIS capital Raqqah,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 2017.

¹⁵ Dettmer, op. cit.

that arms have only been provided to non-YPG elements).¹⁶ Despite U.S. efforts to allay concerns about potential YPG threats to Turkey,¹⁷ Turkish officials have strenuously objected to anticipated YPG involvement in Raqqah's capture, claiming it would worsen U.S.-Turkey relations.¹⁸ In a March 9, 2017, Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Chairman John McCain voiced concern about potential Turkish-YPG conflict affecting U.S. interests in Syria—possibly including the use of Incirlik air base (see description in textbox below)—to General Joseph Votel, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Votel responded that U.S. officials are trying to prevent such potential conflict.¹⁹

In February 2017, Turkish-supported forces obtained control of Al Bab, a key transport hub in northern Syria that had been controlled since 2014 by the Islamic State. President Erdogan consistently refers to Turkish plans to take control of Manbij from the SDF. However, Syrian government forces to the south of Al Bab and SDF forces to the east have converged in close proximity to the Turkish-supported forces' lines of control, raising apparent concerns among Turkish officials that Syria and its allies—particularly Russia—may be making common cause with Syrian Kurds to weaken Turkey's position relative to theirs.²⁰ Observers also warn of the possibility of inadvertent military escalation.²¹

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.²² However, Turkey has a long history of tension with Russia.²³

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.²⁴

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

¹⁶ DeYoung and Sly, *op. cit.*; Linda Anderson, "Work with Turkey, Don't Overwhelm It," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 9, 2017.

¹⁷ Anderson, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ One journalist has written that Turkey may be targeting U.S.-based organizations and U.S.-employed individuals in Turkey to signal its displeasure with current and potential U.S. policy on Syria. Amberin Zaman, "Turkey Shuts Down Mercy Corps' Syria Aid Program," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, March 8, 2017.

¹⁹ For information on reported debates within the Trump Administration regarding the Raqqah strategy, see Dion Nissenbaum and Maria Abi-Habib, "U.S. Split on Plan to Beat ISIS in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2017.

²⁰ Amberin Zaman, "Syrian Kurds Cede Buffer as Turkish-Backed FSA Advances on Manbij," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, March 2, 2017.

²¹ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford met with his Russian and Turkish counterparts in March 2017 to attempt to prevent this outcome and discuss "additional measures for de-conflicting operations." Michael Gordon, "Top U.S. General Discusses Syria With Counterparts From Russia and Turkey," *New York Times*, March 7, 2017.

²² See, e.g., Maxim Trudolyubov, "Why Russia and Turkey Are Drifting Closer To Each Other," *The Russia File* (Wilson Center), February 10, 2017.

²³ Soner Cagaptay, "When Russia Howls, Turkey Moves," *War on the Rocks*, December 2, 2015.

²⁴ "Turkey needed detente with Russia to pursue Syria operation: minister," Reuters, November 30, 2016.

missile defense system,²⁵ 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 non-state actors and local populations for administering areas occupied inside Syria by forces Turkey supports.
- 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 socioreligious movement) were responsible for the attempt.²⁶ 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.²⁷ In a November 2016 poll, 79% of participating Turks responded that they believed the United States was behind the coup attempt.²⁸

²⁵ Burak Ege Bekdil, “Turkey mulls purchase of Russian S-400 air defense system,” *Defense News*, February 22, 2017.

²⁶ 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. Amberin Zaman, “US Pastor in Turkish Jail While Gulen Dominates Talks,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 19, 2017. 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>.

²⁷ 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 Jim Zanotti.

²⁸ Alper Ulus, “Darbenin Arkasinda ABD Var: %79, OHAL Hayatimi Degistirmede: %75,” *HaberTurk*, November 29, 2016.

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 anti-government 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, a popular referendum on which is scheduled for April 16, 2017.³¹

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 January 2017, Turkey's parliament submitted a draft package of amendments to the country's 1982 constitution for a nationwide referendum that is scheduled for April 16, 2017, and could represent a threshold moment for the future of democracy in Turkey.³⁴ If approved via the April referendum, the constitutional proposals would significantly alter Turkey's system of governance, with probable ripple effects for its dealings with the outside world. Among other changes to government structure and the electoral system, the amendments would

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 Under Turkey's present constitution, the presidency is officially nonpartisan and is less directly involved in most governing tasks than the prime minister. Since becoming president, Erdogan has remained active politically, has claimed greater prerogatives of power under the constitution, and has proposed constitutional change that would consolidate his power more formally by vesting greater authority in the office of the president in a way that may be subject to fewer checks and balances than such systems in the United States and other president-led democracies.

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; Mustafa Akyol, "Does Erdogan want his own Islamic state?" *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, April 29, 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.

³⁴ Because the AKP's parliamentary majority was insufficient by itself to obtain the 60% approval within parliament required for the referendum, additional support came from some members of the Nationalist Action Party (Turkish acronym MHP) who have shown willingness to support assertive action by Erdogan against the Gulen movement and Kurds following the July 2016 attempted coup.

- 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.

Although Erdogan has already informally consolidated much of Turkey's executive power, the formal entrenchment of these changes through legal means could undermine efforts by some domestic and international actors to hold Erdogan accountable to their proclaimed standards regarding checks and balances and civil liberties.³⁵

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 colleagues³⁶ 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;³⁷
- official or related private efforts to influence media expression through intimidation, personnel changes, prosecution, and even direct takeover of key enterprises;³⁸
- various measures to prevent future protests, including robust police action, restrictions on social media, and official and pro-government media allegations that dissent in Turkey largely comes about through the interaction of small minorities and foreign interests;³⁹
- 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;⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

Many of these trends have expanded or accelerated in the wake of the July 2016 coup attempt.⁴² Days after the coup, the Turkish parliament voted to approve a three-month state of emergency, which was extended for another three months on October 3, 2016, and again on January 4, 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.⁴³ Experts debate how the failed coup and echoes of past Turkish military interventions might influence future military and government actions.⁴⁴

³⁵ See, e.g., Steven A. Cook, "Recep Tayyip Erdogan: Turkey's Executive President," From the Potomac to the Euphrates (Council on Foreign Relations), January 17, 2017.

³⁶ Tim Arango, "Some Charges Are Dropped in Scandal in Turkey," *New York Times*, October 17, 2014.

³⁷ Piotr Zalewski, "Erdogan Turns on Gulenists' 'Parallel State' in Battle for Power," *Financial Times*, May 6, 2014.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ Lisel Hintz, "Adding Insult to Injury: Vilification as Counter-Mobilization in Turkey's Gezi Protests," Project on Middle East Political Science, June 6, 2016.

⁴⁰ Reuben Silverman, "Some of the President's Men: Yildirim, Davutoglu, and the 'Palace Coup' Before the Coup," reubensilverman.wordpress.com, August 1, 2016.

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ "Turkish Lawmakers Give Leader Erdogan Sweeping New Powers," Associated Press, July 21, 2016.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., William Armstrong, "INTERVIEW: Simon Waldman and Emre Caliskan on Upheaval in the 'New Turkey,'" *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 14, 2017; Ali Bayramoglu, "What Is Happening in the Turkish Military?" *Al-* (continued...)

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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ Amnesty International alleges that some detainees have been subjected to beatings, torture, and other human rights violations.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ This could exacerbate more general economic concerns, including possible effects on Turkey’s financial and business sectors of a 22% drop in Turkey’s currency against the dollar since March 2016.⁵⁰

Vocal supporters—largely among Erdogan’s political allies—try to compare the proposed Turkish presidential system to those in France and the United States, and claim that strong central leadership is necessary to deal with Turkey’s various internal and external challenges.⁵¹ If approved, the changes would permit Erdogan to run for two additional five-year presidential terms, thus potentially keeping him in office through 2029.⁵² Some polling has shown a close race, but some analysts expect the AKP’s streak of electoral victories to continue and the changes to pass.⁵³ Also, some question whether the elections will be free and fair.⁵⁴ Officials in some European countries have sought to limit Turkish officials from campaigning for the referendum among Turkish voters in those countries, prompting criticism and heated rhetoric from Erdogan and his political allies that could be calculated partly to generate electoral support.⁵⁵

(...continued)

Monitor Turkey Pulse, March 9, 2017.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ Mehmet Cetingulec, “Is Turkey Backpedaling on Expulsions Following Mass Purges?” *Al Monitor Turkey Pulse*, September 14, 2016; 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; .

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ “Turkey’s Purges Are Hitting Its Business Class,” *Economist*, February 4, 2017.

⁵⁰ Dimitra DeFotis, “Turkey Struggles, Currency Weak: Debt and Politics,” *Barrons.com*, March 8, 2017; Mustafa Sonmez, “Turkey’s Construction Boom: A Blessing or a Curse?” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, March 6, 2017.

⁵¹ “Voting ‘Yes’ in Charter Referendum Could Support Turkey’s Anti-Terror Fight: Deputy PM Kurtulmus,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 29, 2017.

⁵² Ali Bayramoglu, “Will Presidential Referendum Kill Turkey’s Democracy?” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 23, 2017.

⁵³ Pinar Tremblay, “4 Reasons Turkey Is Destined for an Imperial Presidency,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 27, 2017.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., *ibid.*; Soner Cagaptay, quoted in Patrick Kingsley, “Facing Disunity Within Turkey Ahead of Vote, Erdogan Finds an Enemy in Europe,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2017.

⁵⁵ Patrick Kingsley, “Facing Disunity Within Turkey Ahead of Vote...” *op. cit.*; German Federal Government website, Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande speak by telephone: “Turkey’s Nazi Comparisons Unacceptable,” March 16, 2017; European Commission, Joint statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the Venice Commission’s Opinion on the amendments to the Constitution of Turkey and recent events, March 13, 2017.

Erdogan and the AKP at the Ballot Box: A Chronology

November 2002	Parliamentary elections	AKP gains parliamentary majority with 34.3% of the vote.
March 2003	Local parliamentary by-election	Erdogan wins and becomes prime minister.
March 2004	Nationwide local elections	AKP receives 41.7% of votes.
July 2007	Parliamentary elections	AKP retains parliamentary majority with 46.6% of the vote.
October 2007	Nationwide referendum	AKP-initiated constitutional proposals on electoral reform are approved with 69.0% of the vote.
March 2009	Nationwide local elections	AKP receives 38.4% of votes.
September 2010	Nationwide referendum	AKP-initiated constitutional proposals on wide-ranging matters are approved with 57.9% of the vote.
June 2011	Parliamentary elections	AKP retains parliamentary majority with 49.8% of the vote.
March 2014	Nationwide local elections	AKP receives 42.9% of votes.
August 2014	Presidential election	Erdogan elected president in Turkey's first-ever direct election for that office with 51.8% of the vote.
June 2015	Parliamentary elections	AKP loses parliamentary majority but maintains a plurality with 40.9% of the vote.
November 2015	Parliamentary elections	AKP regains parliamentary majority with 49.5% of the vote.

Government Measures Regarding Kurds

Under the state of emergency that parliament approved shortly after the failed July 2016 coup attempt, 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

Dozens of elected Kurdish mayors have been removed from office and replaced with government-appointed "custodians," and in November 2016, the two co-leaders of the pro-Kurdish HDP (Turkish acronym for Peoples' Democratic Party) were arrested along with eight other parliamentarians under various charges of crimes against the state.⁵⁷ Turkish officials routinely accuse Kurdish politicians of support for the PKK, but these politicians routinely deny ties of a criminal nature. Prominent HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtas 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 Yuksekdag, was expelled from parliament and faces a sentence of as much as 83 years for charges of links with terrorism.⁵⁸ HDP figures insist that these measures have largely been timed to weaken Erdogan's opponents as the constitutional referendum nears.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ See, e.g., 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 "Turkey Names Custodian to Replace Detained Kurdish Mayors," Reuters, November 1, 2016; Rod Nordland, "As Turkey Cracks Down, Kurdish Mayors Pack Bags for Jail," *New York Times*, December 10, 2016.

⁵⁸ 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.

⁵⁹ Kingsley, "Turkey Punishes 2 Leaders of Pro-Kurdish Party," op. cit.

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 HDP) are most influential in driving events.
- Erdogan’s approach to and influence on Turkish government policy regarding the Kurdish issue before and after the constitutional referendum. Though most domestic and international observers previously considered Erdogan to be the only Turkish leader strong enough to deliver a peaceful solution, many now question this assumption in light of his recent nationalistic approach.
- 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.⁶⁰

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.⁶³ 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 2016.⁶¹

During and shortly after the July coup attempt, power to the base was shut off and the airspace over it was closed to some U.S. aircraft after pro-coup 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.⁶²

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Aaron Stein, “Reconciling U.S.-Turkish Interests in Northern Syria,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 2017.

⁶¹ Andrew Tilghman, “U.S. Military Dependents Ordered to Leave Turkey,” *Military Times*, March 29, 2016.

⁶² Oriana Pawlyk and Jeff Shogol, “Incirlik Has Power Again, but Turkey Mission Faces Uncertain Future,” *Military Times*, July 22, 2016.

⁶³ For more information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

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”⁶⁴—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,⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ Additionally, as Turkey's energy consumption grows along with its economy, its dependence on Russia and Iran⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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.

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ Gonul Tol and W. Robert Pearson, “Turkey-U.S. Relations and the Next Administration,” Middle East Institute, October 5, 2016.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁸ 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>.

⁶⁹ For example, in a now-discontinued effort to seek a foreign partner for a multibillion-dollar air and missile defense system, Turkish officials in 2013 indicated a preliminary preference for a Chinese state-controlled company's offer until reported problems with negotiations, criticism from NATO allies, and competing offers from European and U.S. companies apparently led the Turks to move away from this preference. Lale Sariibrahimoglu, “Turkey Begins T-Loramids Talks with Eurosam,” *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, September 8, 2014.

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