

## ISSUES

- The armed conflict between Turkey and its Kurds resumed in 2015, leading to thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced in a few years. Kurdish cities have been destroyed and elected Kurdish officials, including mayors and members of parliament, have been removed from office or sent to jail on bogus terrorism charges.
- Turkey has become increasingly authoritarian under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It is the leading jailer of journalists in the world. The government crackdown on dissenters has intensified. The judiciary has become politicized, and the rule of law has been systematically dismantled.
- There are around 4 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. The nationalist backlash against the Syrians has increased recently due to the country's growing economic problems.
- Turkey has cultivated close relations with Russia in the last few years. It is already dependent on Russia for energy and trade, and it has to work with Moscow in Syria. It has recently started deepening defense ties as well. It purchased the Russian S-400 missile defense system and has expressed interest in buying Russian stealth fighter jets.
- Turkey launched an assault called "Operation Peace Spring" across the border into Syria in October 2019, days after the Trump administration withdrew troops from the area. Following the Turkish move, Turkey and Russia reached a deal that divided up influence in northern Syria. According to the deal, Syrian Kurds would leave what had been a buffer zone of about 20 miles into northern Syria from the Turkey-Syria border. Turkey would maintain control of the area set aside in the cease-fire it reached with the U.S., while Russia and the Syrian government would move into and secure the rest.

## US INTERESTS

- Turkey's failure to find a peaceful solution to its decades-old "Kurdish problem" is causing problems for Turkey-U.S. ties as well as U.S. policy in Syria due to America's ongoing cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a terrorist organization, in the fight against ISIS.

- Increasing authoritarianism in Turkey leads to a more ideology-driven foreign policy. Turkey has been pursuing an Islamist and nationalist Middle East policy since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, which has undermined U.S. goals in the region and driven Turkey away from the Western alliance.
- There have been problems with the implementation of the Turkey-Russia deal in Syria but it has enhanced the regime and Russian presence in the region and sidelined the U.S.
- Turkey is a NATO country. Its close defense ties with Russia weakens the NATO alliance and endangers Turkey's participation in future operations.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Push Turkey and the PKK to the negotiating table. Encourage third parties such as Norway to mediate between the parties.
- Continue to speak publicly and privately at senior U.S. government levels about concerns with the decline of freedom of expression and association in Turkey, provide more support for local organizations working on democracy and human rights issues, and increase overall assistance for civil society and outside NGOs working in areas like women's rights, youth empowerment, economic development, combatting corruption, and inclusion of minorities in the national discourse.
- Work to find ways for refugees to return to Syria.
- Prevent Congress from applying CAATSA sanctions, as this will further damage Turkey's defense industry and push Turkey closer to Russia.