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TURKEY-U.S. RELATIONS AND THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

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The failed coup attempt in Turkey unleashed new problems for bilateral relations with the United States. The question of the role Fethullah Gulen may have played in the coup attempt has exacerbated already-tense ties between the two NATO allies. Turkey has been disappointed in U.S. behavior in recent years, particularly regarding the Obama administration's approach to Syria and its cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish militia. Washington on the other hand accuses Turkey of not doing enough to fight ISIS. These problems will remain for the next administration, which will need to find a way to retain this important alliance.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Syria remains the biggest point of contention between the United States and Turkey, in particular U.S. support for Syrian Kurds
- ◆ Although Turkey would prefer a Clinton White House, relations might not be as smooth as Ankara hopes, with outstanding issues likely to remain
- ◆ The next president will need to deal with the complicated legal process concerning the extradition of Fethullah Gulen, which will likely strain already tense relations between Washington and Ankara and fuel anti-American sentiment in Turkey
- ◆ Disagreements in Iraq are also likely to plague Turkish-U.S. relations moving forward, particularly as more areas under ISIS-occupied areas become liberated
- ◆ There is great potential for improved relations between Turkey and the United States in security and defense cooperation, economy and regional problemsolving if both nations are willing to subordinate other issues to these larger goals

INTRODUCTION

Turkey-U.S. relations were off to a good start when President Barack Obama launched his campaign to reconcile the United States with the Muslim world in a 2009 speech to the Turkish parliament in which he described Turkey as a “model partner.” Regional and domestic dynamics, Ankara’s foreign policy miscalculations, and diverging priorities, however, have since driven a wedge between the two allies. Turkey hopes the next American president will smooth over differences between the two countries, but the challenges facing relations today are unlikely to be resolved in the near future. A Clinton or a Trump White House might address some of Turkey’s concerns in Syria and Iraq, but neither candidate is likely to change what Ankara has perceived as Obama’s most troublesome policies in these countries, such as U.S. cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish militia, the People’s Protection Units (Y.P.G.), which Ankara considers the P.K.K.’s Syrian offshoot, and prioritization of defeating ISIS over Assad.

TURKEY-U.S. RELATIONS UNDER THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

The Syrian conflict has posed the biggest challenge to bilateral ties under Obama. Turkey has been frustrated with the Obama administration’s unwillingness to pursue a more forceful Syria policy, while the United States has accused Turkey of not doing enough in the fight against ISIS. The tension



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between the two allies escalated when U.S. forces airdropped weapons to the Y.P.G., fighting against ISIS in the northern Syrian town of Kobani in 2014, despite Turkey’s objections.

Turkey’s recent military incursion into Syria, reportedly without a green light from the U.S., will further highlight the differing stances of the two NATO allies over the Syrian Kurds. Turkey’s intervention was as much about stopping U.S.-backed Kurdish militia seizing territory as it was about eliminating Islamic State, which led to clashes between the Turkish forces and its backed

Free Syrian Army, and the Kurds. As Turkey extends the operation further south toward the Syrian town of al-Bab, we will see more clashes between these U.S. allies. Turkish military operations managed to capture a strategic strip of territory from ISIS on the Turkish border, a long-time priority for Washington, but if Turkey keeps attacking the Kurds, it will undermine America's anti-ISIS strategy in Syria and drive a further wedge between the two countries.

The tension between the two NATO allies over the Y.P.G. has taken another turn for the worse after the New York Times recent-

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ly reported that the Department of Defense wants to provide more arms to the Y.P.G., sparking a new round of anti-American statements from Ankara. In an effort to prevent U.S. cooperation with the Y.P.G., Turkey has recently offered to take part in the operation to retake the ISIS stronghold Raqqa if Y.P.G. forces are excluded. It has even offered to commit ground troops if its forces are allowed to go south of al-Bab. But Washington does not seem convinced that Turkey can commit enough ground troops to replace the Kurdish forces and get the job done.

The operation to retake Mosul from ISIS is adding further tension to U.S.-Turkey ties. Turkey insists that it will take part in the operation, while Iraq backed by the United States objects to direct Turkish involvement. Washington fears that Turkish participation could spark clashes between Turkish forces and Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militias, and Turkey could use the Mosul operation to launch attacks against the P.K.K. in northern Iraq. Another concern the United States has is the increasing tension between Baghdad and Ankara over the latter's military presence in northern

Iraq. Turkey's parliament recently voted to extend its military presence in Iraq for a further year to take on what it called "terrorist organizations." In response, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has warned Turkey that it risks triggering a

regional war by keeping troops in Iraq, as each summoned the other's ambassador.

The failed coup in Turkey has unleashed new problems for bilateral relations. Turkey has been incensed by the concerns expressed by Washington about Ankara's subsequent crackdown on suspected plotters, but what it perceives as indifference to the coup attempt itself. Complicating matters further is Fethullah Gulen, the Islamic cleric living in self-exile in Pennsylvania whom Turkey accuses of orchestrating the coup attempt. Ankara has demanded that

Washington hand over Gulen immediately but U.S. authorities have said Turkey must first provide evidence of his wrongdoing.

IS A NEW CHAPTER IN TIES POSSIBLE WITH A NEW U.S. PRESIDENT?

All these problems in Turkish-American relations are likely to haunt the new U.S. president. Turkey has pinned its hopes on a Clinton White House, which it thinks it can work in better coordination, particularly on Syria where Clinton has shared similar positions with Ankara. In line with Turkey's preferences, Clinton has called for a more assertive policy that includes support for moderate rebels.

Ankara has been pushing the United States to establish a no-fly-zone in northern Syria and is emboldened by both candidates' remarks on the campaign trail advocating a no-fly-zone. Turkey has been laying the groundwork to make its case. With the military incursion into Syria, Turkish forces and the Free Syrian Army captured the strategic strip of territory along Turkish border from ISIS in which it has been proposing to establish a no-fly-zone. It has already started sending back some of the Syrian refugees Turkey has been hosting on its soil to these

areas. Ankara's plan is to renew its push for a no-fly-zone when the new U.S. president takes office. But with the Russians doubling down their military presence inside Syria with sophisticated air defense systems and Pentagon's reservations about the plan, plus continuing uncertainty about Turkey's real intentions once an agreement is reached, a no-fly-zone might be a difficult sell for the next president.

Prospects of the Turkish government returning to negotiations with the P.K.K. any-time soon are grim, meaning that Turkey will not change its stance vis-à-vis the Y.P.G.

“Turkey has pinned its hopes on a Clinton White House, which it thinks it can work in better coordination.”

Ankara hopes that the new U.S. president will be less willing to work with the Y.P.G., but both candidates have expressed their support for the Syrian Kurds and said they would continue to work with the Y.P.G. in the fight against ISIS.

No matter who the next U.S. president is, the legal process concerning the extradition of Gulen will remain thorny and complicated. The United States will keep pushing for hard evidence linking Gulen himself directly to the coup attempt, and it is unclear whether Ankara can produce that. Once the Departments of State and Justice determine

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ernance structures in Mosul will face significant challenges. In that case, the next president

that evidence of the offense is prosecutable in the United States, it then moves to the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania. If the court turns down the extradition request, Gulen would be set free and allowed to remain in the United States. If the judge approves it, Gulen's attorney could attempt to block his immediate deportation by appealing the decision in the U.S. federal court system. The extradition would ultimately be decided by the secretary of state, but subject to any appeals of the executive order. The tortured images of captured coup plotters and concerns over the rule of law in Turkey will put the secretary in a tough spot, even if the court orders Gulen's extradition. This process could take months, if not years, which will strain already tense relations between Washington and Ankara and fuel anti-American sentiment in Turkey that has already peaked after the failed coup.

In Iraq, disagreements between Turkey and the United States are likely to persist, particularly concerning Ankara's role in the fight to liberate Mosul. The operation might extend well into the first few months of the new president, and the aftermath could prove more difficult than the battle itself. If the current tension between Ankara and Baghdad continues, the post-battle efforts to establish long-lasting and legitimate gov-

ernance structures in Mosul will face significant challenges. In that case, the next president might be forced to take a tougher stance against the Turkish military presence in northern Iraq.

Both candidates are likely to pursue a tougher Iran policy than Obama. Clinton might build a regional coalition to counter Iran's influence, while Trump might choose to enforce the nuclear agreement in a way that would threaten the accord. Turkey's traditional Iran policy has also aimed counter-balancing Iran's influence. Just last year, Turkey joined Saudi Arabia in a Sunni front to curb Iran's regional power. But recently, Ankara has embarked on a process of 'mending ties with neighbors.' The failed coup has accelerated that process. To push the United States both on Gulen's extradition and the Y.P.G. and to show the West that Turkey had other options, Ankara has been cultivating closer relations with Russia and Iran. How much the United States and Turkey can agree on containing Iran will depend on how far Turkey is willing to steer away from its current strategy.

The United States and Turkey will have to work together if Russia's new entry into Syria and the Middle East is to be managed well. Separately, neither country is likely to make a major difference in Russia's plans. It is not yet clear how far Turkey plans to go in warming up relations with Moscow.

So far President Vladimir Putin has offered Turkey some economic palliatives, but nothing of significance in Syria or Crimea where Turkish Tatars live. Putin may well ramp up Russia's role north and south of Turkey in coming months as the Americans transition to new leadership. In such a circumstance, Putin has little incentive to make concessions to Turkey. Indeed, he may expect Turkey to accept Moscow's new body-building diplomacy as the price for continued economic ties with Ankara, a key concern for Turkey's construction giants and other major Turkish businesses. Turkey's choice will be consequential. The arrival of a new American president makes it possible to fashion a more coordinated approach toward Russia.

While relations with the United States might not be as smooth as Turkey is hoping with Clinton at the helm, a Trump presidency is likely to face more challenges in dealing with Ankara. A Trump White House will certainly increase the anti-American sentiment in Turkey. Perceptions that he is anti-Muslim could make it hard for the Turkish government to be seen as cooperating with a Trump administration.

THE NEW US PRESIDENT SHOULD PURSUE “CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT” WITH ANKARA

Whoever becomes the next president and no matter how deep the distrust between Ankara and Washington runs, Turkey remains an important country for the national security interests of the United States. The two countries have enjoyed a close military relationship for decades, with the U.S. operating several military installations there, including the Incirlik airbase, which is today critical in the fight against ISIS. NATO announced in the summer at its summit in Warsaw that it would deploy its AWACS reconnaissance planes to Turkey to help combat ISIS. Ankara is also an important partner in the handling of Syrian refugees and in tracking and apprehending foreign ISIS fighters that use Turkey as a transit point. If Baghdad and Ankara resolve their current problems, Turkey can also play a constructive role in building an inclusive governance structure in Mosul once the city is

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recaptured from ISIS. Therefore, the next administration has to find ways to work more closely with Turkey. To do that, Washington should pursue ‘conditional engagement’ with Ankara.

Since the Y.P.G. remains America’s best bet on the ground in Syria, Washington must push the Turkish government for a return to peace talks with its own Kurds, which collapsed in 2015. If Turkey fails to find a peaceful resolution to its Kurdish problem, it will keep seeing the Kurds in Syria as an existential threat and continue attack-

“Washington must push the Turkish government for a return to peace talks with its own Kurds.”

ing the Y.P.G., undermining Washington’s efforts against ISIS. To encourage Turkey to the negotiating table with its Kurds, the United States has to offer something in return. Turkey’s No. 1 demand is Gulen’s immediate extradition. This will be hard to deliver, but the United States still has carrots to offer Ankara.

Within the NATO framework, the U.S. and Turkey could work to substantially upgrade the Turkish armed forces. While Turkey’s forces have superb units, the overall force faces an array of challenges—in the air force, logistics, and in procuring and managing the most modern weapons systems.

Turkey may turn to Russia or China to demonstrate its political independence, but if it genuinely wants an armed force capable of protecting the country well into the future, it has an opportunity to turn to the country with the world’s most advanced and powerful military in the United States. Ankara has long sought the purchase of armed Predator drones from the United States, which has faced opposition in Congress. The Turkish government has also sought cooperation with Washington on defense technology. By working closely with Turkey on these issues, the United States

could ease some of Turkey’s security concerns and show the Turkish government it is committed to its security. This effort would be long-term, but the need and the opportunity provide a new

American president with a chance to make the offer as a genuine gesture of friendship far into the future.

The United States could also provide support in two ways to Turkey’s business community, traditionally friendly to Americans and always interested in the opportunities the U.S. market provides. First, Turkish regional business expertise in the Middle East and Central Asia is a natural fit for improved partnerships with American firms with capital looking for opportunities. Second, Washington could agree with Turkey that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T.T.I.P.), which currently excludes Turkey, would not disadvantage

either country. Turkey worries that a final deal, as it is presently configured, would hurt Turkey's economy with unfair trade barriers. Currently, the Turkish economy is living on a restricted diet of Gulf construction funding and hot money in its stock market. Turkey's foreign direct investment share of global F.D.I. has shrunk to 1994 levels and the country faces continuing uncertainty about Turkey's private enterprise sector and the role of its central bank in the post-July 15 purge. Foreign investors are worried about judicial independence and the effect of the purge of Gulenists in the business sector. A strengthening of ties on the economic front, negotiated to help both countries and engaging their important business communities is achievable and would improve overall relations.

Cyprus is back in the news. Rumors are circulating that the parties may be closer to an agreement than has been the case for some time. The issue is of greater importance for Turkey than the United States, and this is precisely the reason why Washington might become more active. There is no downside to showing Turks that the Americans will do some heavy lifting, if necessary, to bring about a result that Turks will support. Certainly, more active and visible involvement in the U.N. diplomatic process underway is important, but the United States can also help generate and support a donor confer-

ence to address the economic needs flowing from any agreement. The more the United States can do to remove potential sources of friction in the region, the nearer the area comes to improved economic progress, including Turkey.

Despite recent tensions and continued challenges to U.S.-Turkey ties, there remains room for further cooperation. These are not options founded on a platform of demonstrated goodwill and confidence, but on the realistic needs and opportuni-

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ties open to the United States and Turkey in 2016. Turks have been disappointed in U.S. behavior over past years and especially since July 15, and the Turkish people have been fed a steady ration of anti-American charges, complicating any climb back from the low point of current relations. Washington wonders what Turkey's real priorities are and whether rhetoric is more important than the actions needed to stabilize the region and make Turkey safer. The election of a new American president gives both parties a chance to test the possibilities, and concentrate on what is needed for the good of both nations and this vital region.

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