

Priorities and Challenges in the U.S.- Turkey Relationship

Prepared statement by

Steven A. Cook

Eni Enrico Mattei Senior Fellow for Middle East and Africa Studies

Council on Foreign Relations

Before the

Committee on Foreign Relations

United States Senate

1st Session, 115th Congress

Hearing on Priorities and Challenges in the U.S.-Turkey Relationship

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you and the Ranking Member for the invitation to appear before you to discuss the priorities and challenges in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Since the 1950s, successive American presidents have recognized Turkey as a critical ally. Even before the country became a member of the North Atlantic Alliance in 1952, Ankara dispatched forces to fight alongside Americans during the Korean War. Throughout the Cold War, close American-Turkish security cooperation played an important role containing of the Soviet Union. There were difficulties throughout the decades of partnership, including the 1964 Johnson Letter, Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the American arms embargo in response, and regular diplomatic and political skirmishes over recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The overarching threat that the Soviet Union posed to both countries, however, ensured that these crises, problems, and irritants never disrupted the strategic relationship. It is this history that continues to frame the way in which Turkey is understood in policy debates, but it is outdated. Changes in Turkey, the United States, and global politics since the end of the Cold War require a re-evaluation of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. American policymakers are hard-pressed to make the case that bilateral ties reflect

“strategic relations” or a “model partnership.” As the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard Haass, recently asserted, “Turkey may be an ally, but it is not a partner.”

After 1991 and the end of the Cold War, American and Turkish policymakers maintained close strategic ties as they searched for a new rationale for the relationship. For some analysts, there was reason to believe that Turkey could be as important an ally in the post–Cold War world as it had been during the showdown with the Soviet Union. In the following decades, Turkey was alternately held out among foreign policy analysts as a guide for the newly independent Turkic states of Central Asia whose citizens share cultural and linguistic affinities with Turks, a driver of security and peace in the Middle East, and, recently, a “model” for Arab countries seeking to build more prosperous and democratic societies. None of these projects proved successful because they overestimated Turkey’s capacities, underestimated the historical legacies of the Ottoman domination of the Middle East, and misread Turkish domestic politics and the worldview of the country’s current leadership.

This November it will be fifteen years since the ruling Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym, AKP) came to power, launching a period of political stability, economic growth, and supposedly—as some, myself included, believed—liberal democratic reform. The AKP’s electoral successes have produced the stability of single-party government, and with that Turks have benefitted from new economic opportunities, infrastructure development, and improved access to healthcare. There has been considerable political regression, though. A little more than a decade since Turkey began membership negotiations to join the European Union (EU), it looks less like a European democracy than an elected autocracy. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has overseen a process in which the country’s political institutions have been greatly weakened or re-engineered in the service of his parochial political interests and a transformative national agenda.

The deepening of authoritarianism in Turkey and the development of a cult of personality around Erdogan has had grave consequences for ideals that Americans hold dear, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and respect for human rights. Even so, it is important to note that Erdogan is hardly a tin-pot dictator. He is an extraordinarily adept politician who, for his core constituency, has ushered in a more open, inclusive, and democratic politics.

This moment of empowerment stands in stark contrast to the experiences of Erdogan’s opponents. They have been routinely subjected to coercion, intimidation, and violence. Since the failed coup d’état of July 2016, more than 200,000 people have been detained, arrested, or fired from their jobs. Approximately 130 news outlets have been shuttered. Included among those arrested have been foreign journalists as well as international and Turkish human rights professionals. Academics who called upon Turkish security forces to avoid civilian casualties in the conflict with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)—a terrorist organization—were summarily dismissed from their posts or arrested. Many of those in legal trouble have little recourse because they are accused of being members of “FETO,” the Fethullahist Terror Organization, which the government alleges was behind the failed coup. Defense lawyers have been reluctant to take on these cases out of fear they themselves will be accused of the same. The ripple effects of this crackdown go well beyond those directly caught up in the purge, affecting entire families and ruining their future prospects. The widespread detentions, arrests, and sackings since July 2016 are not actually a new development, they are merely an acceleration of a purge that has been underway since 2014.

The troubling situation in Turkey is not just a matter of domestic politics, however. It has costs for the bilateral relationship between the United States and Turkey. Erdogan's populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism often manifests itself in hostility toward the United States and results in policy choices that are at odds with American interests and goals. There is little reason to believe that this situation will change. As noted above, the bilateral relationship encountered turbulence in the past, but the United States and Turkey overcame these differences because of the dangers the Soviet Union posed to the security of both. There is no longer a common threat or big project that both countries share. At an abstract level, Washington and Ankara share an interest in fighting terrorism, but they each accuse the other of working with terrorists in Syria.

The list of American concerns about Turkish policies and behavior is rather extensive. They include the potential purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system; threats to rescind American access to Incirlik airbase, from which the United States conducts operation against the self-declared Islamic State and where it stores ninety nuclear weapons as a symbol of the American commitment to Turkish security; and promises of military operations against the PKK in Iraq, challenging Iraqi sovereignty and potentially weakening Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. In August, the chief of staff of Iran's armed forces traveled to Ankara for security talks in the first such visit of its kind since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Turkey and Iran have overlapping and conflicting interests in a variety of areas in Syria and Iraq as well as on border security and Kurdish separatism. It thus makes sense for them to seek dialogue, but Turkey's current outreach follows a pattern in which Turkish officials have sought to use their ties with Tehran as a way of alleviating pressure when they have run into trouble with Washington. Turkey's thaw with Iran sows mistrust between Ankara and countries in the Persian Gulf. This only weakens the Trump administration's efforts to build a unified front against Tehran.

Then there is Turkey's determination to, at least, complicate American efforts to destroy the Islamic State in its Syrian stronghold, Raqqa. The Turks are deeply opposed to the U.S. alliance with the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria against the Islamic State. Ankara rightly considers this group to be inextricably linked to the PKK. More than any other issue, the U.S. relationship with the YPG through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has driven tension in American-Turkish ties. The Turks do have a legitimate argument about the YPG and its ties to terrorism, but Ankara played an important role pushing the United States and this Syrian Kurdish group together when, in the summer of 2014, the Turkish government rejected American entreaties to fight the Islamic State together. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has sought to reassure the Turkish government that weaponry provided to the SDF will be strictly controlled and that the United States will not allow the YPG and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party, from establishing an autonomous or independent entity along a strip of territory that the Kurds call "Rojava," adjacent to Turkey's southern border. There is no indication that Turkey's leaders believe these assurances.

Washington's military ties to the YPG are also propelling Turkey's relations with Tehran and Moscow. Turkey and Iran—both with large Kurdish populations—have a common interest in suppressing Kurdish nationalism and separatism. When it comes to Russia, much has been made of Erdogan's alleged admiration of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the rise of so-called "Eurasianists" within Turkey's officer corps who are anti-American and anti-Western. Those factors may very well be part of the explanation, but

Russia's place as the powerbroker in Syria and Erdogan's concerns over Kurdish gains there have compelled him to go to Moscow in an effort to secure Turkish interests in the Syrian conflict.

The final sources of tension are the venomous anti-American discourse that Turkish officials and media outlets representing the government have employed since the summer of 2016 as well as the treatment of Americans both inside and outside of Turkey. Turkey's leaders have long played on the reservoir of anti-Americanism within Turkish society to their political advantage, but Erdogan oversaw an unprecedented attack on the United States after last summer's failed coup. The government and government-friendly media engaged in blood-curdling rhetoric that placed blame for the coup on, among others, U.S. Central Command's General Joseph Votel, the CIA, American officers serving at Incirlik, a professor at Lehigh University named Henri J. Barkey, and Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY). After the coup attempt, the Turks arrested Pastor Andrew Brunson, who has been living in Turkey for twenty-three years, and a NASA scientist of Turkish origin who is an American citizen named Serkan Golge. There are also at least a thirteen other U.S. citizens in pre-trial detention in Turkey. Of those, American consular officials in Turkey have been denied access to five of them. The Turks have also arrested a long-serving foreign service national who was an employee at the U.S. consulate in Adana. With the exception of one American who was jailed before the coup, all are facing charges related to terrorism.

In Turkey today, "terrorism" is a catch-all charge that can be used against peaceful opponents of the government, followers of Fethullah Gulen—the Pennsylvania-based cleric who once was a partner of Erdogan and is now accused of masterminding last year's failed putsch—or supporters of the PKK. The latter two are plausible, but there is also another possibility: the Americans being held in Turkey are bargaining chips to secure the extradition of Gulen and an end to the federal case against a Turkish-Iranian businessman named Reza Zarrab. The latter issue is particularly important to Erdogan because Zarrab was instrumental in busting sanctions on Iran, using gold traders in Istanbul and Turkey's state-owned Halkbank in the process. Zarrab is also believed to have knowledge of corruption at the highest levels of the Turkish government.

The abuse of Americans in Turkey, which has compelled experts like myself to avoid visiting the country, has taken place alongside violence or threats of violence against Americans in the United States. Recently, fifteen members of Erdogan's security detail were indicted for beating up peaceful protesters outside the Turkish ambassador's residence last May. This a repeat of the melee that Erdogan's security team precipitated outside the Brookings Institution in March 2016 and at the United Nations in 2011. In addition, Turkish diplomats have sought to create a hostile environment for those who research and write about Turkey. The embassy in Washington routinely sends staff to take video of public events addressing Turkish politics. The embassy's justice counselor once accosted me in an elevator after an event at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars because he did not like something that I said. After exiting the building, he chased me down the street yelling at me. Turkey's consul general in Chicago used a clip of Professor Barkey and me laughing during an event and posted it on Twitter claiming that we were laughing about the 249 people who were killed during the failed coup. Given the political atmosphere in Turkey, what the consul general did was nothing less than an incitement to violence. This is all part of an effort to undermine the ability of American scholars and journalists to work in Turkey.

What can the United States do about the deteriorating situation in Turkey and the Ankara's problematic foreign policy? American policymakers must understand that they have little means to influence Turkey if they continue to define the relationship in the same terms as it was during the Cold War. The United States and Turkey have a long history, but past strategic ties hardly qualify as justification for the same in the present or future. Turkey remains important to the United States but less because it can be helpful and more because of the trouble Ankara can cause.

It is often prudent to approach differences with other countries through private diplomacy and offering more "honey than vinegar" in public. The records from the Barack Obama and George W. Bush administrations also indicates, however, that that remonstrating with Turkish officials in private and publicly praising them has little, if any, effect on the policies that Ankara pursues at home and abroad. There is, of course, no guarantee that the application of public pressure on Turkey will alter its behavior for the better—the opposite may well occur—but it is a superior policy option than sanctioning Turkish actions through silence.

The political, economic, and diplomatic pressure that Russia brought to bear on Turkey after Turkish warplanes shot down a Russian bomber in November 2015 is instructive. In time, Erdogan was compelled to issue an apology and pursue a conciliatory approach to Moscow. I am not advocating a similarly thuggish approach to Turkey, a long-standing ally, but rather offering a case in which Turkey's leader responded positively to public censure. Toward that end, there is an opportunity for the United States, especially Congress, to make Turkey aware of Washington's displeasure with its democratic backsliding, its treatment of Americans, and a foreign policy that is at variance with the interests and goals of the United States. It can do this by

- instructing the Government Accountability Office to conduct a study of the value of the U.S.-Turkey relationship;
- requesting that the Department of Defense study the costs and modalities of leaving Incirlik airbase or shifting some of its operations to other facilities in the area; and making the results of this study public.
- requiring that the State Department review its travel advisory to Turkey;
- restricting Turkey's participation in big-ticket, high-tech weapons development and procurement; and
- publicly demanding that Turkish officials refrain from their ongoing efforts to politicize the American judicial process.

There are fears within the policy community that Turkey has become unmoored from the West. Those fears are warranted, but not entirely accurate. Ankara is and will continue to be a member of NATO, but it is not a partner in the Atlantic Alliance; Turkey is linked to Europe through trade flows, investment, and financial institutions, but it does not desire to be part of the West broadly defined by liberal norms, principles, and ideals. There is no doubt that large numbers of Turks are untroubled by this change. Ahmet Davutoglu—who served as both prime minister and foreign minister—has written that Western institutions are alien to predominantly Muslim societies like Turkey. There are also large numbers who want to remain within the ambit of the West. Above both groups is Erdogan, who is determined to undo the institutions and values of the republic—itsself never a democracy—and replace them with a moralizing, religious (but not theocratic), and authoritarian political order. Whether Erdogan is successful or not, Turkish politics and society have

changed dramatically since the 1950s, as has American politics and society, and consequently the United States must re-evaluate its relationship with Turkey.