





# TURKEY AND THE UNITED STATES: STAUNCH ALLIES OR RIVALS?

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Reports about the decision of the United States to set up a border force with the so-called “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF) that would operate along the Turkish and Iraqi borders and also inside Syria along the Euphrates river, exacerbated the tension in the already strenuous relations between Ankara and Washington. Turkey regards the SDF that is dominated by the Kurdish YPG as indistinguishable from the PKK terrorist organization. Accordingly, this move of Washington is seen from Ankara’s perspective as adding insult to injury and as a clear sign that the United States will not keep its promise to dump the YPG once the war against ISIS is won.

Turkey’s concomitant military mobilization along the Syrian border and the statements made by President Recep T. Erdoğan hinting at a large-scale military operation towards the sectors in northern Syria where the YPG aims to expand its authority may well result in unwanted and, certainly, an undesired confrontation between Turkey and the United States. So, how did Turkey and the United States, which have long treated each other as a “staunch ally” during the Cold War period, come to the point of wrangling and why do they seem to be drifting further apart from each other day by day?

The answer lies in the developments that have taken place since the end of the East-West confrontation that heralded the beginning of a new era in Turkish-American relations due to the changing priorities of the long-time allies, which manifested themselves in their policies toward Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War. The divergence of approaches toward the future of the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks aggravated the tension in the bilateral relations. Had it not been for the sake of having a history together, “rivalry” would be the term to define the nature of the state of affairs in Turkish-American relations since then.

The above paragraph is borrowed from the abstract of an article, entitled “Turkey and the United States in the 21st Century: Friends or Foes?” that was published in the Winter 2008 issue of the Korean Journal of Defense Analysis, which I had co-authored with my colleague Dr. Tarık Oğuzlu. In that article, Dr. Oğuzlu and I had discussed the sources of policies that were bringing Turkey and the United States to the brink of wrangling in a number of issue areas in the fields of foreign and security policies, and argued that a lack of common security culture was primarily responsible for most of the trouble encountered in the bilateral relations.

Ten years later, even a brief look at the current state of affairs in Turkish-American relations suggests that bilateral relations have been deteriorating since then, let alone marking any notable achievement. Therefore, a meaningful assessment of the current situation in Turkish-American relations requires a sound analysis of how and why, at times of dramatic changes in world politics, both countries have not been able to adjust their foreign and security policies.

### **The “Kurdish Issue” as a Dividing Factor in Turkish-American Relations**

The fractures that are being experienced lately in Turkish-American relations, such as the short-lived suspension of visa applications to the US diplomatic missions in Turkey, or the so-called “Zarab court case” are not necessarily the results of the recent developments taking place in Syria, where Ankara and Washington find themselves very much at odds with each other in their respective policies.

At the roots of the major controversy between the two capitals, lies the very issue of how to treat the sub-state armed groups in the region (e.g. YPG and PYD that are the mere extensions of the PKK), which has been steadily poisoning the bilateral relations over the last quarter of the century. Thus, it makes sense to return to our ten-year-old article, in the remaining part of this section, in which Dr. Oğuzlu and I tried to analyze the causes and the consequences of the divergence of approaches between Turkey and the United States regarding the treatment of sub-state armed groups in the region.

Had Turkey and the United States not been staunch allies throughout the Cold War years, they would have easily declared each other as “adversary” due to their respective foreign policy objectives since the end of the Cold War. More specifically, since 9/11, Turkey and the United States have found themselves in the middle of an undeclared rivalry. Even though the grand strategic objectives of Turkey and the United States seemed to converge regarding the substance, there always existed deep divergences between the two nations concerning the means and the methods of achieving these objectives.

Hence, the two allies have started to come to the point of wrangling more frequently than ever in the pursuit of their objectives. It would not be wrong to say that the foreign policies of the American administrations were more warmly received in Turkey when the United States was 5,000 miles away. Yet, when the United States became a



de facto neighbor of Turkey in the aftermath of its invasion of Iraq in 2003, it has been seen in the Turkish public domain as the “number one enemy” and the greatest threat to Turkey’s security, stability as well as territorial and political integrity.

Despite a number of initiatives taken by high caliber individuals such as former diplomats and statesmen who played active and significant roles, on both sides, in the evolution of Turkish-American strategic relations, the outlook of the bilateral relations did not seem to be promising for the years and decades ahead. It should be noted that this process included the institutional interventions by the leading think tanks and non-governmental organizations, such as trade chambers and business unions.

We thought, this was an anomaly, considering the fact that the two nations were among those that would benefit the most by pursuing congruent policies with one another regarding the same problem areas, such as terrorism and weapons proliferation, which are defined by both of them as posing the greatest threats to their national security. The crisis of confidence in Turkish-American relations, however, could not be solely attributed to the leadership in both countries, when George W. Bush was the US president. Thus, we believed, the expectation that the relations would soon improve with the change of government in either or both countries could not be accepted at face value.

The crisis back in the mid-2000s owed its existence too much deeper factors, of which the growing rift between the strategic cultures of both countries would come first. Therefore, we anticipated in 2008 that unless the strategic gap is narrowed down, the years ahead might be fraught with new crises and dwindling cooperation. Hence, we argued that the core attributes of the Turkish and American strategic cultures in dealing with the challenges and threats to their national security, where the essence of the problem seems to lie, must be carefully studied.

This was important, for the dynamics of the Cold War era politics did long conceal the strategic differences between Ankara and Washington. Turkish and American decision-makers have long believed that their common threat perceptions would continue to guarantee their security cooperation within the context of NATO and elsewhere in the world even after the abolishing of the threat posed by the Soviet Union. Decades of close and intense cooperation in the military-strategic domain made the observers believe that both countries were subscribed to a common strategic mentality.

However, the developments that took place in the aftermath of the collapse of the bipolar international system, and then the dynamics of the post 9/11 era, have made it quite clear that Turkey and the United States did not see eye to eye on a number of strategic issues. That the United States being the most important actor across the globe having a hegemonic agenda, and Turkey a middle-sized power in its environment trying to protect itself against the uncertainties of the new era, has gradually shaped the strenuous nature of bilateral relations back then as well.

In the decades that followed the end of the Cold War, both countries have gradually drifted apart in terms of the ways and means of achieving their strategic objectives despite their high degree of congruence in substance.

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To cite a few, both Turkey and the United States had to deal with terrorism more frequently and intensively in the post-Cold War era than ever before. Terrorism has become an inescapable problem for both nations due to changing international security environment. Notwithstanding the similarity of the problem that Turkey and the United States faced, it was difficult to argue that the degree of cooperation between them in dealing with the threat of terrorism was at the level that would be expected from "staunch allies".

On the contrary, falling short of meeting the expectations of each other has become a serious source of friction and even a bone of contention between the two countries. In the same vein, both Turkey and the United States were concerned with the rise of political Islam in the world. Turkey, being a secular state by Constitution, has been sensitive about the separation of the state and the religion in the administration of the country. Hence, both Turkey and the United States agreed that politicization of Islam must be tackled somehow. Nevertheless, both countries had deep disagreements on how to achieve this goal.

The growing strategic divergence between Turkey and the United States became evident when one focused his or her attention on the way as to how these countries define terrorism and the means to deal with it.

Despite all its horror, the September 11 attacks did not lead to a wholesale Turkish acceptance of the American conceptualization of terrorism. To Washington, the new-age terrorism was fundamentally different from the old conceptualizations in the sense that it was more driven by religious ideologies than ever and that the main goal of these terrorists was to annihilate their opponents. In the eyes of the US decision makers, the new-age terrorism, as represented by Al Qaeda, posed a grave threat to American way of life. What were at stake were the core American values. Americans conducted their struggle against new age terrorism as if they were at war, suggesting that there were only two possible

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outcomes; either total victory or total submission.

In contrast to the United States, Turkey viewed terrorism as more of a security problem caused by the employment of military instruments by a group of terrorists driven by what they believed to be achievable political goals. To Ankara, terrorism still operates in its classical understanding and the most important challenge in this context came from the PKK, which is a classical terrorist organization employing brutal and violent means in order to help bring into existence an independent Kurdish state in Turkey's southeastern region.

The aftermath of the US-led war in Iraq has made it quite clear that Turkey and the United States think differently as to how to define as well as to deal with the PKK terrorism. Turkey considers the PKK as an important threat posed to its national security and unity and thinks that it is entitled to resort to every possible legal means available to eradicate this threat. In this sense, Turkey has grown unhappy with the fact the regime change in Iraq has provided the PKK with the possibility of using northern Iraq as a logistical safe haven.

In the eyes of the Washington administrations, securing the strategic cooperation with the Iraqi Kurds during the post-war reconstruction and state-building period in Iraq has long appeared to be more important than aiding one of the staunchest allies in NATO, namely Turkey in its fight against the PKK.

While Washington mainly sees the PKK terrorism as Turkey's domestic problem and asks Ankara to find a solution to it within the framework of improving human rights and liberal democracy, Ankara argues that the resilience of the PKK terrorism is very much related to the political dynamics in northern Iraq. Moreover, Ankara views the politicization of the PKK terrorism through skeptical eyes and accuses the United States of turning a blind eye to Turkey's sensitivities.





While Washington approaches the PKK issue from an instrumental and tactical point of view, the PKK terrorism touches the very core of Turkey's security interests. Furthermore, while Turkey defines the Al Qaeda as a terrorist organization and helps the United States win its war in Afghanistan, Ankara does at the same time shy away from defining terrorism in reference to religion. To Ankara, the attempts at defining terrorism in religious terms, by making reference to Islam in particular, does not only breach the teachings of Islam but also carries the risk of endangering Turkey's secular identity.

### **What Now? Déjà Vu All Over Again**

The above section demonstrates quite clearly that not much has changed in the positive direction, if not gotten even worse, due to a series of structural reasons that do not allow one to be optimistic about whether the once-staunch allies can overcome their much-troubled relations any time soon.

What is happening now, ten years later, is simply the "new wine in old bottles" or "déjà vu all over again" situation. To better understand what is meant by these phrases, it suffices to replace in the above section, PKK with YPG, and Al-Qaeda with ISIS, wherever they appear in the text, then read again the same paragraphs with the "new" actors, to acknowledge their role today in the "old" strategy of the United States toward the Kurds in northern Iraq and northern Syria.

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An Iraqi soldier holds US and Iraq flags as around





One might easily see that the causes and the consequences of deep divergences in the approaches of Turkey and the United States as to how to treat the sub-state armed groups in the region that we have discussed in our 2008 article remain almost exactly the same as the present situation.

This, unfortunately, tells us that whether it was George W. Bush or Barack H. Obama in the past, or Donald J. Trump today, or someone else in the White House in the near future, Turkish policymakers will continue to experience serious difficulties in having their NATO ally on their side in their fight against terrorism and this will be the greatest hurdle in the Turkish-American relations to overcome. ■

