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To Arm or Not to Arm the Kurds: A Look as U.S. National Security Interests in Kurdistan

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This paper outlines the many geopolitical downsides to arming the Kurds while remaining agnostic to the domestic political benefits in the United States of being “tough” on the Islamic State. While there are certainly security and geopolitical reasons to engage through proxy with the Islamic State, domestic political pressure and a misunderstanding of who the Kurds actually are could cause the United States to act against its interests. Arming Kurdish militias like the People's Protection Units (YPG) is especially damaging to the United States’ relationship with Turkey, but also it harms its relations with Iraq and the other parties involved in the Syrian War. Furthermore, the long-term legacy of the recently botched Kurdish independence referendum is still unclear, and Kurdish leadership appears unstable at the moment. The United States should resuscitate its relationship with Turkey by discontinuing its armament of the YPG while applying economic coercion to gain leverage over the increasingly despotic regime.

The Kurds are an anomaly in the Middle East. Numbering between 25 and 35 million people, they occupy the mountainous areas containing parts of Turkey, Iran, Armenia, Iraq, and Syria.¹ In fact, they comprise the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East, but—barring the short-lived and Soviet-supported Kurdish Republic of Mahabad²—the Kurds have never secured a stable state of their own. They have also experienced repeated political abuses within their respective countries and from global powers, including the United States. In September 2017, the Kurds made headlines when the United States’ Department of Defense, under President Donald Trump and Secretary of Defense James Mattis, reportedly funneled “billions of dollars’ worth of Soviet-era weaponry to anti-Islamic State groups in Syria, with questionable oversight.”³ These groups include the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, or YPG, which is fighting against the

¹ “Who are the Kurds?” *BBC News*, October 31, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017.

² Behnam Ben Taleblu and Merve Tahiroglu, “Kurd Your Enthusiasm,” *Foreign Affairs* November 25, 2017.

³ “Who are the Kurds?”

Islamic State (IS) alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces. According to a September 2017 report spearheaded by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), the Pentagon provided \$2.2 billion worth of weaponry to such rebel groups.⁴

It is difficult to discern⁵ whether the Pentagon will continue to arm the YPG, however. At the moment, there are a number of contradictory claims coming from Turkey, the White House, and Secretary Mattis regarding any possible shift in the policy of arming the YPG. On November 24, 2017, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced in a news conference that President Trump vowed to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that the United States would cease arming the YPG.⁶ When questioned, Trump's National Security Team appeared taken aback by the announcement from Ankara and were uncertain how to respond.⁷ The State Department referred questions to the White House, and several hours transpired without confirmation from the National Security Council.⁸ A White House description of the call was cryptic, mentioning only that Trump notified Erdoğan of "pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners on the ground in Syria."⁹ Later, U.S. officials said they planned for American troops to continue working with Kurdish soldiers in northern Syria, with Secretary Mattis saying defiantly, "We're not going to just walk away right now."¹⁰ In short, whether the United States will continue arming the YPG is uncertain, but a synthesis of the various comments suggests that the United States *might* stop arming the YPG, though not right away.

⁴ Rhys Dubin, "The Pentagon Is Spending \$2 Billion Running Soviet-Era Guns to Syrian Rebels," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017.

⁵ As of the first week of December 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The lack of commitment to the Kurds in Washington, D.C., belies the fact that while the White House is willing to work with Kurdish groups such as the YPG in the fight against the Islamic State, this collaboration comes at a great political cost. Arming Kurdish nationalist groups such as the YPG risks offending allies and non-allies alike in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey due to the YPG's association with the terrorist organization known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In Turkey, for instance, decades of conflict with the PKK have contributed to what looks from the outside like a raving, irrational hatred of many Kurdish groups. This hatred is not going away, however, and it must be taken seriously if the United States hopes to have Turkey as an ally, despite the countless domestic transgressions of President Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Depictions of a monolithic Kurdish society are often flawed but useful from a rhetorical perspective. For instance, the Turkish state broadly sees “the Kurds” and “the Kurdish question” as a threat. Rational or not, this animus is hard to deny. Specifically, Turkey's former Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay said in an interview that, throughout AKP rule since 2002, nearly 60 percent of all “reforms and democratization initiatives” undertaken were in relation to “the Kurdish issue.”¹¹ As the largest non-Turkish ethnic group in the country and, indeed, one of the largest nations of people in the world without a sovereign state,¹² the Kurds have experienced a tempestuous relationship with the AKP and with Turkey. Furthermore, the Kurds “have been regarded as a potential threat to ‘Turkishness’ and thus to the territorial integrity of the state” for decades.¹³ Erdoğan has viewed their existence and their involvement in Parliament with

¹¹ P. Seib and C. Senem, eds. *Turkey's Public Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 193.

¹² “The Time of the Kurds,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 4, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017.

¹³ Seib and Senem, *Turkey's Public Diplomacy*, 197.

increasing apprehension since 2012, which was the deadliest year in the conflict between Turkey and the PKK since the arrest of PKK forerunner Abdullah Ocalan in 1999.¹⁴

In contrast, the American public, foreign policy elites, and media seem to view Kurdish groups like the YPG favorably. Prominent online communities such as Imgur and Reddit lionize the northern Iraqi Kurdish fighters known as the Peshmerga in popular posts entitled “Can we get some love for the Peshmerga?”¹⁵ or “Meet Joanna Palani the Iranian-Kurdish YPG fighter with a \$1 Million bounty on her head.”¹⁶ Because the Kurds have become a sort of “American darling” for their status as ISIS-busting underdogs,¹⁷ real deliberation concerning the “complex promises and pitfalls” of Kurdish independence has been underdeveloped.¹⁸ Alongside popular user-uploaded posts, legacy news organizations such as the *New York Times* publish articles like, “A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS’ Backyard” or “To Save Iraq, Arm the Kurds.” The latter article makes a startling claim: “Turkey should not be a problem. Although it is currently fighting its own Kurdish population, it has close relations with the Iraqi Kurds.”¹⁹ While it is true that Iraq’s Kurdish situation is different from the Kurdish independence movements in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, this remark vastly underestimates the Turkish state’s hostility toward such movements, while overestimating the potential for independence movements in Iraq to be conducive to independence movements elsewhere. The fact that Iraq and Turkey trade with one another is no guarantor of good rapport. American media and public opinion regarding “the Kurds” consistently misunderstands the degree to which Turkey views Kurdish independence

¹⁴ Ibid., 203

¹⁵ TheSevenDeadlySins, “Can We Get Some Love for the Peshmerga?” *Imgur*, May 23, 2016., <https://imgur.com/gallery/lmhtn>.

¹⁶ Mossysabertoothtiger, “Meet Joanna Palani the Iranian-Kurdish YPG Fighter with a \$1 Million Bounty on Her Head,” *Imgur*, February 9, 2017., <https://imgur.com/gallery/pGRzG>.

¹⁷ Taleblu and Tahiroglu, “Kurd Your Enthusiasm.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Aliza Marcus and Andrew Apostolou, “To Save Iraq, Arm the Kurds,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2017, accessed February 09, 2018., <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/opinion/to-save-iraq-arm-the-kurds.html>.

movements anywhere as a direct—if not existential—threat. Furthermore, the overt lionization of Kurdish militias by American audiences could prompt actions that harm the United States’ relationship with Turkey and other countries in the region.

For years, Western public opinion has fancied the Kurds as both a model minority for their emphasis on egalitarianism and as an unlikely player in international geopolitics.²⁰ Some of this admiration is reasonable and hard-earned. Since multilateral air strikes began in September 2014, the Peshmerga (a word which means “one who confronts death”) have reclaimed twenty-five to thirty percent of territories lost to the Islamic State, effectively curbing ISIS’ access to revenue streams such as oil or natural gas.²¹ According to a first-person account in *The Atlantic*, the Kurds have proven to be a motivated and tactful fighting force:

The soldiers I spoke with acknowledge many reasons previous U.S.-trained forces came up short. But this time is different, they insist. Iraq, along with the Kurds in northern Iraq, presents a bit of a perfect storm. They have new motivation and have shown it. They spent 2016 fighting for their homeland, taking huge losses, and keep fighting. They’re demonstrating advanced and improving skills. And the United States has their back, significantly. ISIS is on the run, on the battlefield.²²

At times, the Kurds seem like the only viable militia with enough organization and motivation to effectively fight ISIS without putting American boots on the ground. This has contributed to a sort of *mythos* wherein the Kurdish people, their interests, their ideals, their intentions, and their short-term successes are emphasized, while long-term military capabilities and the interests of NATO allies are sidelined. Claims that the Kurds’ values and interests align with those of the United States might have some moral or interpersonal insight, but they lack a real understanding

²⁰ G. E. Fuller, *Turkey and the Arab Spring: Leadership in the Middle East* (Bozorg Press, 2014).

²¹ Denise Natali, “Counting on the Kurds,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017.

²² Kevin Baron, “How the U.S. Military Sees the Anti-ISIS Fight,” *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017.

of the dynamics of the contemporary Middle East and the criteria for a political order that lasts after U.S. forces go home.

Recent Events in Iraqi Kurdistan

One clear takeaway from the past year is that “the Kurds” are not a monolithic entity of principled do-gooders at odds with the chaos of the contemporary Middle East. Although some of them fit that description, they are generally an alluring but dysfunctional group of fragmented cultures with sometimes-untenable ideals caught in the same, complex calculus as other factions in the region. There is certainly *descriptive* power in understanding how “the Kurds” are perceived: For Turkey, they are inherently rebellious insurgents; for the United States, they are a vaguely heroic entity with a somewhat common cause to the American agenda.²³ The rest of this article, however, assumes that any depiction of a monolithic Kurdistan has little *prescriptive* relevance.

On a regional level, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or Iraqi Kurdistan, has grown emboldened in its petitions for land and independence in recent months and years. For example, when Kurdish militias regained Sinjar from ISIS in 2015, the leader of Iraq’s Kurdish region, Masoud Barzani, claimed that only the Kurdish flag would fly in the newly liberated territory.²⁴ Barzani’s statement was a bold attempt to secure some form of political independence for Iraqi Kurdistan, but the government of Iraq militarily asserted that the area, with its lucrative oil fields, must remain under federal control.²⁵

²³ Nick Danforth, “Do Kurds Exist?” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2015-10-26/do-kurds-exist>

²⁴ Loveday Morris, “How the Kurdish Independence Referendum Backfired Spectacularly,” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017., https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-the-kurdish-independence-referendum-backfired-/2017/10/20/3010c820-b371-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html?utm_term=.d53b1b60ed6d.

²⁵ Morris, “How the Kurdish Independence Movement Backfired Spectacularly.”

More recently, in September 2017, Barzani spearheaded an independence referendum in Iraq. The vote was accompanied by “euphoric celebrations in the streets of Irbil and other Kurdish cities,” but the realities of global geopolitics soon quashed the celebratory mood.²⁶ Washington, Ankara, Tehran, and Baghdad all objected to the referendum, but Barzani and the KRG believed that Iraq’s neighbors would be unwilling or unlikely to “muster sustained sanctions or a blockade.”²⁷ When the referendum occurred, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered his forces to recapture the city of Kirkuk from the Peshmerga.²⁸ As sporadic fighting broke out, many Peshmerga were ordered to stand down.²⁹ In the end, the referendum backfired spectacularly, both politically and as a personal PR mishap for Barzani. Pundits of all stripes dubbed the event an “unmitigated disaster” for its miscalculation of American, Turkish, Iranian, and especially Iraqi capacity and willingness to rally an adequate response.³⁰ Perhaps the KRG assumed that trade ties between the KRG and Turkey would soften any historical animosities and limit the Turks’ resentment toward the referendum.³¹ In any case, Iraqi Kurdistan lay in political disarray, and the sacrosanctity of territorial integrity proved, once again, to carry more weight in global geopolitics than anticipated.

The Peshmerga and the Fight against IS

While viewing the Kurds solely as combatants against the Islamic State is unwise, the Kurds have undoubtedly proven to be a “committed and pragmatic partner” in the fight against

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Alex Dziadosz, “The Economic Case against an Independent Kurdistan,” *The Atlantic*, September 26, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/kurdistan-barzani-iraq-turkey-blockade-oil/541149/>.

²⁸ Morris, “How the Kurdish Independence Movement Backfired Spectacularly.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zaid Al-Ali, “What Next for Iraq after the Failed Kurdish Referendum?” *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017., <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iraq-failed-kurdish-referendum-171028092628081.html>.

³¹ Ibid.

IS.³² The Kurdish Peshmerga have battled radical Islamist groups, and they have a history of striking “politically expedient alliances to protect their interests and territory.”³³ In other words, the Kurds *do* have value in fighting against the Islamic State:

These alliances, alongside coalition airstrikes, have borne fruit. Iraqi Kurds claim to have retaken about 10,500 miles of territory from ISIS while providing sanctuary for nearly two million refugees and internally displaced persons, 19 percent of whom are Sunni Arabs. Diyala is now the only province in northern Iraq with no ISIS presence. Kobani and about 100 surrounding Syrian villages are also ISIS-free. These gains coincide with coordinated Kurdish–Sunni Arab battles around Aleppo that have pushed ISIS back to strongholds in Raqqa, Deir al-Zor, Al-Hasakah city, and the surrounding countryside.³⁴

Nevertheless, even the most optimistic observers note that Peshmerga forces’ “successes” have profound negative externalities. For instance, coalition air strikes antagonize Sunni Arabs, the support of whom the United States needs to repel the Islamic State and pursue lasting peace.³⁵

The successes of the YPG are encouraging “transborder Kurdish nationalism,” which is a thorn in the side of Turkish and Iranian claims to territorial integrity.³⁶ Finally, Kurdish independence movements’ fight against ISIS is fracturing the Kurds.³⁷

Not only is a monolithic, unified Kurdistan a rhetorical mirage, but the Kurds’ allegiance to the United States is also problematized by a complex history. While the Kurds have spent decades cultivating an image as a “stable, private-sector friendly outpost in a region fraught by sectarian turmoil,” this does not necessarily mean that they trust or view Washington favorably.³⁸

³² Natali, “Counting on the Kurds.”

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Dov Friedman and Cale Salih, “Kurds to the Rescue,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2014-06-17/kurds-rescue>

Although the KRG appears opportunistic, they know well the sting of empty promises from the United States:

History is an issue too. Simply mention the year 1975 to any Kurd, and, within moments, one will hear of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s “betrayal”—the Algiers Agreement, which temporarily ended the conflict between Iraq and Iran. The agreement left the Iraqi Kurds, who had supported the Iranian Shah, to suffer at the hands of the Baathists. The treachery is seared into Kurdistan’s collective memory as a reminder of the dangers of leaving oneself to the mercy of the established powers.³⁹

The Kurds have experienced more recent Western duplicity as well. Near the beginning of the Iraq War, U.S. special forces and Peshmerga joined forces against the Ansar al-Islam insurgency.⁴⁰ The Kurds thought they had demonstrated their role as staunch allies of the United States, but Paul Bremer, head of the coalition provisional government in Iraq, “sought to disarm them.”⁴¹ After “sweeping” through Kirkuk in 2003, pressure from the United States prompted the Kurds to pull back—an event the KRG authorities lamented for years before recapturing the “revered” city in 2017.⁴²

As with many foreign entanglements, history is a liability for the United States when dealing with the Kurds. While interests align for the moment, those who anticipate an enthusiastic Kurdish ally into the foreseeable future are likely to be disappointed. For this reason and many others, viewing the Kurds solely in reference to the fight against the Islamic State is problematic and short-sighted.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Turkey and the Kurds: A Tumultuous Relationship

Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have a tumultuous relationship with the country's Kurds, which make up 15 to 20 percent of the total population.⁴³ Since Abdullah Ocalan established the PKK in the 1970s to call for an independent Kurdish state, more than 40,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced.⁴⁴ Turkey considers the YPG (whom the U.S. allegedly armed with Soviet-era weaponry) and the PYD (a Kurdish opposition party in Syria) as extensions of the PKK. The YPG denies this, and the United States appears to treat the YPG and the PKK as separate entities despite evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, the Turkish government seems to prioritize military actions against the PKK over the Islamic State as the U.S. partners with the Kurds to fight ISIS.⁴⁵ Suffice it to say, there is a profound disconnect between the values of the United States and Turkey and their military priorities.

From the viewpoint of the Turkish state, supporting or arming “the Kurds” is akin to advocating *for* terrorism, working *against* Turkish national sovereignty, undermining “Turkishness” and Ottoman imperial aspirations, and dismissing the interests of Erdoğan and the AKP. In fact, Erdoğan explicitly stated this. When the United States ordered a munitions airdrop to the Syrian city of Kobani, Erdoğan retorted with a brash accusation: “The U.S. did this in spite of us. I told them the aid you’re sending is going to a terror group.”⁴⁶ From the Turkish perspective, the United States is choosing the support of a group of stateless, quasi-Marxist rebels over an ally with one of the largest armies in NATO. Moral or not, the values and interests

⁴³ “Who are the Kurds?”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ S. Almkhtar and T. Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting the Kurds Who Are Fighting ISIS,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2015, accessed November 30, 2017., <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-isis.html>.

⁴⁶ Piotr Zalewski, “Contentious Kurds,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2014-11-02/contentious-kurds>

of the Turkish government prioritize military actions against the PKK as much as, if not more than, the Islamic State.⁴⁷ Again, Erdoğan quipped in a trip to Latvia, “To us, ISIS is the same as PKK.”⁴⁸ Although Western capitals were incensed at the quote, Erdoğan’s quote reflected the popular opinion in Turkey, where 43.7 percent of Turks see the PKK as a greater threat to their country than ISIS.⁴⁹ From a purely realist perspective, the United States would do well to tap into the interests of allies such as Turkey and use these as leverage rather than trying to morph them through tacit coercion, passive aggression, and tone-deaf idealism.

Ottomanism and Erdoğanism

While some of Turkey’s hatred of the Kurds originates from real-world violence at the hands of the PKK, some of it stems unilaterally from the shrewd political maneuvering of President Erdoğan and the AKP. With the abandonment of peace talks between the Turkish government and the ethnic Kurds, an eruption of conflict paralyzed much of the southern and eastern quadrants of Turkey in 2015.⁵⁰ The AKP and President Erdoğan, in particular, were at odds with the Kurds politically—especially after the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) procured 10 percent of the seats in Turkey’s parliamentary elections in 2015, effectively thwarting Erdoğan’s bid to expand the powers of the presidency at the time.⁵¹

In September 2015, after the AKP momentarily lost traction but before the November elections in which it gained back its electorate, *Foreign Policy* cited increasingly divisive

⁴⁷ Almkhatar and Wallace, “Why Turkey Is Fighting.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “The Hatred Never Went Away,” *The Economist*, September 10, 2015, accessed April 15, 2016., <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21664225-civilians-join-fight-between-soldiers-and-guerrillas-burying-years-calm-hatred-never>.

⁵¹ D. Zakheim, “Turkey’s Two-Faced Deal,” *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2015, accessed November 25, 2017., <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/29/turkeys-two-faced-deal/>.

rhetoric and legal/military actions against the Kurds as a somewhat transparent attempt to consolidate power and rally its nationalist base:

Rather than accepting the challenge of building a coalition government in a polarized political climate, Erdoğan, it quickly became clear, was more interested in forcing another election in which a more favorable result would return his party to power single-handedly. The voters had “made a mistake,” Erdoğan declared, but the next round of voting would “correct the problems” it created. Playing on long-standing fears that coalition government would lead to chaos, Erdoğan told voters that only an AKP majority could bring the country stability.⁵²

Indeed, fighting between the PKK and the Turkish government intensified with “renewed fury” in the weeks and months before the elections in November 2015:

The AKP is now hoping the resurgence of Turkey’s war on Kurdish separatists will help woo back nationalist voters and that renewed PKK violence will discredit the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP), whose success in June thwarted Erdoğan’s ambitions. With violence spreading into cities and onto the streets and the value of the Turkish lira falling, Erdoğan continues to insist this all could have been avoided if the AKP had achieved an appropriate majority in the last election.⁵³

Of course, any speculation or assumption regarding the intentions of the AKP runs the risk of oversimplification or, worse, spreading inaccuracies. Many signs, however, indicate that the AKP systematically ramped up political rhetoric at the expense of liberalism and the rule of law—a process that arguably continues today. In addition to the rampant human rights abuses in cities such as Cizre in southern Turkey, it is worth noting that the Kurdish issue has been among the AKP’s most successful instruments in the attempt to consolidate power and suppress dissent over the past decade, with increased vigor in the past few years. By the same token, American

⁵² Nick Danforth, “How Low Will Erdoğan Go?” *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2015, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/11/how-low-will-Erdoğan-go-turkey-isis-kurdistan-akp/>.

⁵³ Nick Danforth, “How Low Will Erdoğan Go?” *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2015, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/11/how-low-will-Erdoğan-go-turkey-isis-kurdistan-akp/>.

support for Kurdish militias fuels anti-American sentiments not only among the upper echelons of the AKP, but also among those affected by PKK violence in southern Turkey who are looking for a strongman. The authoritarian drift in Turkey is phenomenally complex, although some of it stems from the fact that a panicky electorate saw the world around it descending into chaos. Meanwhile, the United States and NATO were not only unreliably absent during Turkey's search for security; they seemed to be arming the very people who posed the threat in the first place. This provided avenues for Erdoğan and others to seize the reigns and fill the security vacuum with newfound vigor—asserting himself and his party as the champions of order and security in the country.

Much of this fear-laced zeal takes the form of an Ottoman idealism unique to Erdoğan's AKP. Many AKP supporters celebrate the cultural shift within Turkey's government from regarding the Ottoman empire as regressive and corrosive to something worthy of celebration and continuation.⁵⁴ Others note that such "jaundiced invocations of the Ottoman past" can blind the AKP to the region's willingness to be swept into the fold of "Erdoğanism" or "Ottomanism."⁵⁵ The Kurds do not view the Ottoman period as favorably as the AKP, and they are more willing to resist than the Turkish government presumes. Another feature of Erdoğanism is a near-paranoia regarding outside influence in Turkish affairs, which spiked after the attempted coup in July of 2016. Westerners, Kurds, secularists, journalists, and followers of the Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen—these are the imposters against whom there is no defense but Erdoğanism:

As far as Erdoğan's right-wing and Islamist supporters are concerned, the coup attempt was not only a domestic attack but also a plot by scheming "foreign allies" to overthrow Erdoğan through their Gulenist proxies. His supporters insist that it was

⁵⁴ Ryan Gingeras, "Ottoman Ghosts," *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

simply the latest in a series of historical attacks the West has launched against the Turkish nation and the umma, stretching back to the Crusades. According to this line of thinking, by targeting Erdoğan and the Turkish state simultaneously, these nefarious foreign interests inextricably linked the future of the country to the fate of the leader: without Erdoğan, Turkey cannot become a great nation again or fulfill its historical mission of restoring the dignity of the umma.⁵⁶

Again, while observers in the West might call this a feature of the AKP paranoia, it is undoubtedly a shrewd and effective political instrument. By arming “the Kurds,” the United States risks further alienating and further destabilizing the Turkish regime, giving more fodder for AKP authoritarianism, and prompting Turkey, a NATO ally, to balance against the United States. Turkey is too important and the Kurds too fragile for the United States to risk disaffecting a key player in its current geopolitical strategy.

The Trump Presidency and the Unknown Future of Turkey and the Kurds

Turkey’s willingness over the past several years to reach out to Russia and Iran—both historical rivals—is worrisome because it suggests that Ankara has “given up on Washington.”⁵⁷ After the 2016 election of U.S. President Donald Trump, however, Ankara hoped for a new era in U.S.-Turkish relations.⁵⁸ President Erdoğan congratulated Trump on his success and began to exhibit anti-Iranian rhetoric to show a readiness to contain Iranian aggression in Syria and beyond.⁵⁹ He also hoped Washington would stop, or at least curtail, its support for the YPG, which he and the Turkish government view as a direct wing of the PKK.⁶⁰ Instead, the Trump administration increased its support for the YPG, since it sees the YPG as the only militia in the

⁵⁶ Soner Cagaptay and Oya Rose Aktas, “How Erdoganism Is Killing Turkish Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-07-07/how-erdoganism-killing-turkish-democracy>

⁵⁷ Gonul Tol and Alex Vatanka, “Turkey’s New Alliances,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 28, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-09-04/turkeys-new-alliances>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

region capable of fighting the Islamic State.⁶¹ In response, Ankara continued to turn to Moscow for support—by purchasing Russia’s S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, for example— which indicates increased foreign policy aggression and a deep frustration with both NATO and the United States.⁶² Iran has taken note of this fact, and it has started vocalizing unprecedented anti-Kurdish rhetoric against the YPG.⁶³ Indeed, much of the geopolitical positioning in Syria is in opposition to the YPG, not the Islamic State. By siding with the YPG, the United States government is arguably siding with the group most despised by all the state actors involved in Syria.

The Trump administration presents uncertainties to all parties involved. President Trump has quipped that he does not feel the same obligations toward existing U.S. policies and relations, such as when he flip-flopped on whether he was bound to a “one China” policy in December 2016.⁶⁴ Non-state actors that aspire to independence hope this unorthodox posture signals openness to recognizing new states. One article has pointed out that they are right to hope, as Trump’s choice for Secretary of State at the time, former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson,⁶⁵ sent a message to Kurdish leaders: “Tillerson may not be an experienced diplomat, but he is a friendly face to the Kurds, having overseen ExxonMobil’s expansion to Kurdistan in 2011.” The article continues, “Tillerson’s experiences as an oil mogul have been met with a mix of concern and praise in Washington, but they are generally viewed as an advantage by the oil-

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Samuel Hickey, “Turkey’s New Missiles,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-10-20/turkeys-new-missiles>

⁶³ Tol and Vatanka, “Turkey’s New Alliances.”

⁶⁴ Morgan Kaplan, “For Iraqi Kurds, Trump Brings Hope for Independence,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 25, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017.. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-04-12/iraqi-kurds-trump-brings-hope-independence>.

⁶⁵ White House Chief of Staff John Kelly has reportedly developed a plan to force Secretary Tillerson out of office, in which case C.I.A. Director Mike Pompeo is likely to replace him. See Peter Baker, Maggie Haberman, and Gardiner Harris, “Tillerson Is Seen As on the Verge of Being Ousted,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 2017.

rich Kurdistan Region of Iraq.”⁶⁶ Indeed, oil may be a major factor in Tillerson’s appointment, and the KRG relies on oil sales for 90 percent of its revenue.⁶⁷ Among “oil executives and seasoned Iraq analysts,” for instance, some have proposed that many Kurds, especially in Iraq, can be motivated by the outlook of “oil revenues and budgetary guarantees” alone.⁶⁸ The KRG sends roughly three million barrels of oil to Ceyhan, Turkey, but it has met resistance when selling globally.⁶⁹ This is at least in part because of interventions from the Iraqi government. In response, some have posited that if the United States helps facilitate and ease the way for KRG oil trading, Kurdish militias would be more likely to support the United States in the battle against the Islamic State.⁷⁰

The Trump presidency has interesting effects on the Kurdish question. Broadly, President Trump’s inexperience and ineptitude is viewed by those on the losing side of U.S. foreign policy as a potential for positive gain. His complete lack of diplomatic protocol could provide “useful gaffes” or helpful improvisations that serve Kurdish interests.⁷¹ This lack of tact was seen when then-president-elect Trump received a complimentary phone call from the Taiwanese president, much to the chagrin of the Chinese.⁷² A similar situation with the Kurds could create leverage or elicit a reaction from Turkey to the Kurds’ benefit. While the Kurds might view the situation in hopeful expectation, the actual effects of the Trump presidency on the United States’ relationship with Turkey is yet to be known. If Trump’s bombastic rhetoric regarding the fight against the

⁶⁶ Kaplan, “For Iraqi Kurds, Trump Brings Hope for Independence.”

⁶⁷ Dziadosz, “The Economic Case Against an Independent Kurdistan.”

⁶⁸ Friedman and Salih, “Kurds to the Rescue.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kaplan, “For Iraqi Kurds, Trump Brings Hope for Independence.”

⁷² Ibid.

Islamic State is any guide to his foreign policy priorities, it might not bode well for the United States' relationship with Turkey.

Policy Recommendations

Economic coercion and incentives aimed at the AKP are certainly a risky and direct method, but these might be among the few languages to which the AKP elite will listen attentively. President Erdoğan has proven that he does not receive verbal criticism well, but Turkey's geopolitical goals require him to pay attention to energy policy and security.⁷³ Turkey is situated between the world's largest consumers and producers of energy and, like Russian President Vladimir Putin, Erdoğan's mass appeal is, in part, predicated on his ability to maintain the flow of energy through Turkey.⁷⁴ In quiet moments, Turkey aspires to be the "energy hub" of the region, specifically in the transfer of natural gas from Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan to Europe.⁷⁵ Disregarding the irony of Turkey's apparent desire to trade with Iraqi Kurdistan, this ambition presents a genuine opportunity for the United States. In this turbulent moment for energy security in Turkey and the world, the United States is in a position to use this concern as leverage. For example, the conflict with the PKK in Southeastern Turkey threatens the transfer of oil from Iraqi Kurdistan, through Turkey, and into Europe.⁷⁶ In addition, the PKK is known to sabotage natural gas pipelines in the region, such as the Kirkuk-Ceyhan natural gas pipeline, the

⁷³ A. Ünal, "Turkey's Energy Security Also Vital for Regional Security, Minister Says," *Daily Sabah*, April 20, 2016, accessed April 22, 2016.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ T. Varal, "Turkish Energy Security Under Threat," *Oil Price*, March 11, 2016, accessed November 24, 2016.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, and the Turkey-Iran natural gas pipeline.⁷⁷

A worthwhile counterpoint to those hoping to rekindle ties with Turkey is that the policy of placating Erdoğan is actually a sort of appeasement. How can the United States pursue its interests in the region with Turkey's support and without writing a blank check to the "New Sultan?" In response, many foreign policy experts⁷⁸ are calling for a more assertive response to Erdoğan's provocations: "If Erdoğan knows that he needs the United States, the thinking goes, Washington can take a tougher line with him and secure more cooperative behavior."⁷⁸ This is a salient point. The pursuit of an "assertive" response, however, should not translate into arming the YPG. Rather, it should mean working through diplomacy, economic coercion and incentives, removing the barriers to cooperation, soft power, and other methods.

From the position of the United States, Turkey's energy interests represent a remarkable opportunity to relieve Turkey of the burden of energy insecurity by facilitating exports from Iraqi Kurdistan. First, the United States can broker deals with the Kurds in Iraq and provide protection to natural gas pipelines threatened by the PKK. Then, by strategically leveraging interests in the region, the United States can help lift the burden of energy insecurity in exchange for key shifts in AKP policy in Syria, toward the Islamic State, regarding the refugee crisis, or even domestic reform. For example, the U.S. could offer air defense, intelligence, or UAV support to protect pipelines in southeastern Turkey, which would be a service to both the KRG and the Turkish government with the added political benefit of being tough on the PKK. Third, the United States could "quietly drop its objections to Kurdish independent oil sales" in Iraq and help secure safe

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Nick Danforth and Ilke Toygur, "How to Dull Turkey's Autocratic Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2017, accessed November 30, 2017., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-09-19/how-dull-turkeys-autocratic-edge>.

passage of KRG oil tankers in international waters.⁷⁹ In any event, strengthening Iraqi Kurdistan economically is more sensible than arming the YPG. If an independent Kurdistan were to be established anywhere, it would make the most sense for it to be in Iraqi Kurdistan because of the stability it could provide Iraq and the nature of the KRG. Furthermore, overseeing increased trade between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan provides an avenue to support certain Kurdish militias that provide a buffer against the Islamic State without appearing sympathetic to either the PKK or the YPG. If an independent Kurdistan lies in the distant future, it should emerge and sustain itself with minimal U.S. ties and obligations. Increased trade would not only strengthen economic ties between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan, provide an independent revenue stream for the KRG, bolster a functioning Kurdish civil society, and help fund those fighting the Islamic State through increased trade revenue, but also it could lessen Turkey's reliance on Russian oil and Iranian natural gas. Increased trade would serve as a timely reminder to Turkey of its desire and need for the patronage of the United States. This relationship is sweetened for the KRG by the prospect of selling more gas in Turkey, which, because of a lack of both transportation and storage, costs double the European price.⁸⁰ In economic terms, Turkey is a "premium market" when it comes to gas exports.⁸¹ Everybody wants to sell to Turkey, and the United States has the opportunity to broker a solution while gaining important concessions from the AKP. All parties can save face, and the United States can increase its prestige in the region with minimal monetary or military investment.

⁷⁹ Friedman and Salih, "Kurds to the Rescue."

⁸⁰ O. Mawji, "Russia vs. Turkey: Geopolitics and Energy Security," *Geopolitical Monitor*, December 1, 2015, accessed April 22, 2016., <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russia-vs-turkey-geopolitics-and-energy-security/>

⁸¹ Ibid.

Of course, the logistical triangulation of this recommendation alone is significant, and the status of Iraqi Kurdistan after the botched referendum is still unknown. It requires many parties to coordinate across a number of cultural and political barriers, and the Trump administration's apparent distaste for diplomatic procedure certainly does not help matters. However, with United States' diplomatic resources and economic leadership, it is far more realistic and has a clearer definition of success than a number of other available political options that center on arming non-state actors to fight other non-state actors.

The first step in achieving this goal is to rebut the damaging narrative that the United States is actively arming Turkey's enemies. Turkey has sided with countries such as Russia and Iran in recent years to balance against the United States. While Turkey has failed to bandwagon with these countries with much enthusiasm, it does so in part because of America's perceived closeness to the Kurds. This poses a problem since, as *The Atlantic* astutely noted, "There is no path to victory over ISIS without Erdogan."⁸² Turkey is an important national security ally, a NATO partner, the host country for 70 to 80 U.S. nuclear weapons at Incirlik Air Force Base, and a necessary player in the global refugee crisis. For this reason and many others, few in the U.S. government are itching to lose Turkey's friendship entirely:

The historic weight of Turkey's alliance with the United States, its regional influence, and its capacity to derail other U.S. interests have led officials to conclude that, one way or another, the bilateral relationship must remain functional. Like that of former President Barack Obama, the administration of Donald Trump has therefore sought other means to placate Turkish anger over the United States' ongoing support for Kurdish forces in Syria. In addition to offering intelligence about PKK targets outside of Syria, the administration has muted its criticism of Turkey's democratic decline and continues to offer Erdoğan public meetings with the U.S. president.⁸³

⁸² Aaron, Stein, "The Awkward, Necessary U.S.-Turkey Relationship," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2017, accessed December 03, 2017.

⁸³ Danforth and Toygur, "How to Dull Turkey's Autocratic Edge."

If American national security interests were the only consideration—discounting ideals or abstract notions of human rights or political pressures to defeat the Islamic State—the verdict would be clear: The United States should stop supporting Kurdish forces like the YPG and instead focus on its relationship with Turkey. Turkey has far more to offer the United States, and its military capabilities are far greater than the YPG or any other Kurdish group. Turkey is too important to disregard, and its relationship with the United States is not yet beyond repair in the long term.

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