



**THE EXTENT TO WHICH AMERICA'S SUPPORT FOR KURDISH  
GROUPS THAT THREATEN THE TURKISH BORDERS  
AFFECTED THE U.S.-TURKISH RELATIONS**

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a European Union membership aspirant. The country is a link between the East and West hence an important global stakeholder. Turkey and the United States (U.S.) have been substantial and dependable allies for almost a century. During the cold war, Turkey provided the U.S. with a bulwark against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the country supported the stabilization of Iran and Iraq in the 1990s and played a vital role in the launching of the East West energy corridor (Economic Outlook, ISPAT, 2011). Turkey has also been supporting peace building efforts in Afghanistan since the occurrence of the 9/11 attacks (Ahmet, 2015). The relationship between the U.S. and Turkey has been loosely termed as a strategic partnership which has survived economic downturns, numerous administrations, and regional wars. Despite the existence of that Turkish-American strategic partnership, the U.S. has, and continues to, provide support to various Kurdish groups, some of whom are engaged in an armed conflict with Turkey, exacerbating the threats to the Turkish border security, and affecting the bilateral ties between the two countries.

The strategic partnership between the U.S. and Turkey extends beyond on defence issues, to include other policy areas such as economics. In addition to Turkey being a NATO member from 1952, the country is ranked as the 18<sup>th</sup> latest economy globally (Acma, 2002). Those factors make it almost impossible for the U.S. to influence the Middle East without the help of Turkey. Turkey is a significant player in promoting American interests within its geopolitical region. U.S., and several other Western countries, have long perceived Turkey, being a Muslim majority country, as a model of 'Islamic Democracy,' and as a bridge for spreading their democratic ideals, interests and influence to the rest of the Islam world (Atmaca, 2017). These aspects

indicate that the U.S. has historically perceived Turkey as an important strategic partner. However, most recently, the relationship between Ankara and Washington has deteriorated, resulting in an undeclared crisis between the two countries.

In 2009, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposed to carry out significant political and economic changes in Turkey. The AKP showcased transformation in political power in Turkey to the U.S. as a way of getting allies (Ahmet, 2015). During President Obama's administration, the president visited Turkey which showed an elevation in the relationship between the two countries. In 2012, Obama named a Turkish leader as one of his most trusted people. However, conflicting interests between Turkey and the United States have contributed to the decline in the bilateral relations among the two countries.

Turkey and the U.S. have further disagreed on issues of politics and security. The Syrian civil war has been a major contentious issue for the U.S.-Turkey relations, with the Turkish administration perceiving a failure of the Obama administration to facilitate Turkey's efforts of removing Assad from power, which have reportedly resulted in Ankara providing support to mainly jihadist opposition groups in Syria, while the U.S. maintained a priority on fighting ISIS, resulting in its support for Syrian Kurdish groups, an aspect that has further strained the Turkish-American relationship (Atmaca, 2017; Zanotti & Clayton, 2021). The tensions between the U.S. and Turkey, caused by their opposing agendas in the Syrian civil war and the U.S.' perception of authoritarian Turkish leadership, have severely complicated the bilateral cooperation within the Turkish-American relationship. A low point in the bilateral relationship between Turkey and the U.S. occurred in 2016, when President Obama refused to meet President Erdoğan who had attended the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington (Atmaca, 2017). Such issues indicate a heightened deterioration of the Turkish-American relationship. From 2017,

political analysts have continually pointed out the poor relationship between the U.S. and Turkey (Dorian, 2018). As a result of Turkey's authoritarian rule, the West has largely ceased to consider the country as the role model for the Middle East, and additionally, the European Union is no longer considering its membership candidature (Zanotti & Clayton, 2021). Those issues have led to the development of new dimensions in the relationship between Turkey and the U.S., alongside establishing further strains on the alliance among the two countries.

The ongoing armed conflict between Turkey and various Kurdish insurgent groups has further strained the Turkish-American alliance, with each side perceiving the other as pursuing incompatible objectives. Since 1978, various Kurdish insurgency groups, mainly operating under the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) umbrella, have been engaged in an armed conflict with the Turkish administration, while pursuing their demands for either the establishment of a fully independent Kurdistan state or to secure greater levels of autonomy, political rights, and power within the republic of Turkey (Küçükkeleş & Mankoff, 2014). The U.S. features a long and complicated history with the Kurdish communities in its involvement in the geopolitics of the Middle East. While the U.S. recognises Turkey's view of the PKK as a terrorist organisation since 1997, the country has maintained support for various other Kurdish groups, especially in Syria and northern Iraq, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military extension the People's Protection Units (YPG), groups that Turkey, contrastively views as extensions of the PKK on the other side of its southern borders (Atmaca, 2017). The support rendered by the U.S. to such Kurdish groups has become one of the leading straining factors on the Turkish-American relations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite maintaining a bilateral relationship with Turkey, the U.S. also continues providing support to Kurdish groups that threaten the security of the Turkish borders. Küçükkeleş and Mankoff (2014) have identified that, while the U.S. has long supported the Turkish campaign against the PKK, Washington also backs the several Kurdish groups in several states, while also opposing them on others, perceiving both Turkey and certain Kurd groups as important to its strategic interests in the Middle East, resulting in inconsistencies in the country's foreign policy regarding the Turkish-American relations, and Washington's interactions with the Kurds. With the Kurdish-Turkey conflict remaining unresolved, the U.S. support for those Kurdish groups presents a clear threat to its relations with Turkey. However, it is not clear the extent to which that American support for the insurgent Kurdish groups threatens the Turkish-American relationship. This study sought to fill that information gap, by assessing the extent to which the American support for the Kurdish groups threatening Turkey's security at its borders threatens the U.S.-Turkish relationship. The study also analyses the relationship between the USA and Turkey, the Kurdish insurgency along the Turkish borders, the post-Cold War dynamics in the relationship between the two countries, the EU deal, and refugee challenge in Turkey. The paper then reviews the shifting foundations and competing interests for the two countries, discusses the aftermath of the failed coup and its implications on the USA and NATO operations. The penultimate section of the paper discusses the existing tension between the two countries, assess the strategic and political partnerships and the impacts of Turkey's involvement in Syrian matters. The paper then recommends the most ideal conditions and strategies for improving the poor relations between Turkey and USA.

### **The Objectives of the Study**

The following are the objectives of this study:

1. To identify the Kurdish groups that threaten Turkey's border security, which receive support from the United States.
2. To determine the extent to which the United States provides support to the Kurdish groups that threaten Turkey's border security.
3. To evaluate the effect of the support provided by the United States to the Kurdish groups that currently threaten the border security of Turkey on the Turkish-American relations.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions facilitated the satisfaction of the identified study objectives.

1. Which Kurdish groups that threaten Turkey's border security does the United States support?
2. To what extent does the United States provide support to the Kurdish groups that threaten Turkey's border security?
3. What is the effect of the support provided by the United States to the Kurdish groups that currently threaten the border security of Turkey on the Turkish-American relations?

### **Significance and Justification of the Study**

The study is important as it will add to the knowledge base on the relationship between Turkey and USA. Existing literature illustrate the relationship between Turkey and USA but fails to explain how U.S.'s support for Kurdish groups which threaten the borders of Turkey impacted on the relations and suggest how the two countries can mend their bilateral relationship. The paper discusses the conditions of the Kurds residing in Turkey and gives the dealings between

the two countries. The post war dynamics, the refugee challenge the European union deal further illustrates the relations between the USA and Turkey. The recent terrorist attacks in Turkey had an impact on the relationship between the two countries, further affecting their dealings.

The competing interests between the Turkish population and the Americans has resulted in bad blood between the countries destroying the plan and hope for bilateral relations. The paper discusses the conflicting interests between the USA and Turkey and assesses potential outcomes of Turkey's involvement in Syria. An in-depth discussion on the nature of the relationship results in the suggestion of recommended cause of action for both countries with an aim of improving their relationship. The assumption is that both countries benefit from the good will hence the need for joint efforts to repair the bruised relations.



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