



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

Student's Name

Institutional Affiliation

Course Name and Number

Instructor's Name

Due Date

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS**

### **Kurdish groups threatening Turkey's border security, which receive support from the United States**

The U.S. features an extensive history of interactions with various Kurdish groups in the Middle East, some of whom are involved in insurgent activities along the Turkish border. Küçükkeleş and Mankoff (2014) trace the beginnings of the engagement of the American foreign policy on the Kurdish issue to the period towards the end of the First World War, with the inclusion of calls to grant autonomy to non-Turkish people from the dissolved Ottoman empire as part of President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points statement that he delivered in January 1918. That statement suggested an American support for the later Treaty of Sevres of 1920, which, among other elements, provided for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. With the consolidation of the Turkish Republic rejecting the Treaty of Sevres and its provisions, combined with the decision of the League of Nations to allocate the Mosul region, primarily populated by Kurds, to the then newly established British mandate of Iraq, the prospects of an autonomous Kurdistan state came to an end (Küçükkeleş & Mankoff, 2014). These events would lay the foundations for the development of the yet unresolved Kurdish problem, which is at the heart of the ongoing Kurdish-Turkey conflict.

The termination of the prospects of an independent Kurdish state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the distribution of the regions predominantly occupied by the Kurds to Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, rendering them essentially stateless, and seeded the Kurdish problem that continues today. Since then, the U.S. has sporadically engaged various Kurdish groups to facilitate their strategic efforts in the Middle East, beginning in the early stages of the Cold War, when the Americans recognised the utility of the Kurdish geopolitical ambitions as a useful tool

for countering the Soviet interests and influences in Iraq (Küçükkeleş & Mankoff, 2014).

Subsequent Middle Eastern events of interest to the Americans have frequently established the need for the U.S. to engage with various Kurdish groups, despite the objections of Turkey, with which Washington maintains bilateral ties. Issues such as the Gulf War, the rise of the Baath party to power in Iraq, the erosion of diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Iran, the and the U.S. war against various terrorist organisations in the Middle East, among others, have continued sustaining the importance of the Kurds to the U.S. (Gibson, 2018). To facilitate its regional interests in the Middle East, the U.S. has provided support to various Kurdish groups, some of which are engaged in armed conflicts with Turkey, primarily along Turkish borders. While the U.S. maintains that it does not support the establishment of a free Kurdish state, and its identification of the PKK as an insurgent terror group, when pursuing mutual security goals, the country has engaged in associations with several of the groups associated with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) political umbrella, which include some elements of PKK, Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), and Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK), alongside providing financial and military support to some of the PKK factions and allies, such as Civil Protections Units (YPS), People's Protection Unit (YPG), and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), several of which present militant threats to Turkey's border security (Lanza, 2017). The KCK largely serves as the mainstream, public extension of the PKK. As noted by Pope (2013), to develop an organ that would allow it to conduct legal and formal interactions with other regional and international bodies that it cannot otherwise perform given its recognition as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and the U.S., PKK formed KCK following a series of congresses conducted in northern Iraq from 2005-2007, with the organisation having its own governance structure, but with the constitution of KCK also

recognising PKK as the source of KCK's ideological power, its members as commissars for all Kurdish people, and the executive leadership of KCK having to vow their loyalty to Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the PKK. Those aspects mean that KCK is essentially inseparable from PKK, and that the support rendered by the U.S. to groups allied to, or operating under the organisation bears significant implications for its association with Turkey.

The onset of the U.S. war on Saddam Hussein-led Iraq escalated the need for its development of new strategic alliances between the U.S. and various Kurdish groups in the Middle East. Larrabee (2008) notes that the onset of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 required the U.S. to extend its protection over the northern Iraq region that had become the de facto Kurdish state following the Gulf War, with Washington requiring the assistance of the Iraqi Kurds in their war effort and to keep Iraq as a unified state. This perspective shows that U.S. considered the Kurds as integral to the success of their military action against Saddam Hussein, and in sustaining their strategic interests in Iraq after the war.

The U.S. has extensively utilised the assistance of Kurdish groups in its efforts to counter a potentially mounting threat of jihadist development in Syria, by establishing mutually beneficial relations with those groups, in direct opposition of Turkey's regional policy. Following the outbreak of the "Arab Spring" uprisings that rocked the political establishment in several Muslim-majority nations in the Middle East and Northern Africa in 2011, Turkey, an Islam-majority country that was not involved in that disruption, opted to maintain its 'zero problems with neighbours' policy, by avoiding engagements in regional political issues, an approach that collapsed mainly because of various circumstances led to Ankara drawing increasingly further against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria as key events gravitated towards the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in the summer of 2012 (Orton, 2016). In addition to

the outbreak of an armed civil conflict in Syria, the withdrawal of the U.S. from Iraq presented Turkey with additional geopolitical challenges that affected its foreign policy. When the U.S. withdrew its troops from Iraq in 2011, it left various unaddressed problems in the region, primarily concerning the relation and status of the autonomous KRG-led territory in northern Iraq, which had attained significant levels of empowerment and status elevation throughout the period of the American occupation of Iraq since 2003, with other regional authorities including the newly re-formed Iraqi government and Turkey, an issue that was especially important because the territory administered by the KRG straddled an area featuring large, newly discovered oil and gas reserves (Park 2014). That aspect made the ambiguously controlled Kurdish jurisdictions to become even more attractive to insurgents and Kurd separatists.

American military activities in the Middle East after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Iraq have also involved the formation of strategic alliances with several Kurdish groups and factions in the Middle East. One of the groups that has significantly benefited from such alliances is the PYD in Syria, and its militia arm, the YPG. The PYD maintains political and military leadership over most of the Syrian Kurdish territory, which it identifies as of Rojava, and features strong links and shared backgrounds with the PKK (Gunter, 2016). PYD experienced significant growths in the levels of its influence and power in Syria in the years following the U.S. war in Iraq, to become the dominant nationalist movement among the Syrian Kurds. Until 2012, PYD was just one among many other Kurdish parties in Syria, holding modest levels of influence, political and military abilities (Kaya & Lowe, 2017). However, PYD has since experienced significant increments in those criteria. After the summer of 2012, PYD took control over several predominantly Kurdish-populated towns and regions in northern Syria, and subsequently expanded its territory over the next few years, to establish a

semi-autonomously governed region that the group identifies as Rojava or West Kurdistan (Kaya & Lowe, 2017).

The rise in the dominance of PYD coincided with the policy measures implemented by the U.S. of engaging financial and military support to various Kurd groups in Iraq and Syria to assist in the efforts of fighting the ISIS/ISIL terrorist insurgency in those regions. The U.S. had developed armed coalitions, primarily with Kurdish militia groups, to combat the ISIS insurgents and Al Qaeda offshoots such as the Jabhat al-Nusra, who had established bases and training camps across extensive areas Syria following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2012 (Berkley, 2016). The American approach to the fight against Islamic terrorist groups that had established significant presence in Syria following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2012 established conditions that facilitated the elevation of the influence of PYD in the country. Following the withdraw of American troops from Iraq, and the victories scored by ISIS/ISIL militants against Iraqi forces in Mosul and other areas, the U.S. was unwilling to commit ground military operations against the terrorist insurgent operations in Syria, instead preferring to utilise militant alliances with local groups in northern Iraq and Syria, primarily with the Kurds, supplemented with airstrikes by the U.S. military (Berkley, 2016). In Syria, certain conditions resulted in the PKK-linked PYD being the main viable partner for the U.S. to form an alliance to counter the Islamic insurgency in the country. Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2012, PYD quickly established control over much of the Kurdish-occupied territories in Syria, consolidated most of the armed Kurdish groups within its territory, and prevented the emergence of any armed Kurdish group other than its own YPG paramilitary militia (Larrabee, 2016). These factors meant that, when the U.S. sought to form armed coalitions against ISIS/ISIL, and other

Islamic terrorist insurgent groups, in Syria, the PYD was the only viable option, despite the concerns of Turkey on the connections of the PYD with PKK.

### **The extent to which the United States provides support to the Kurdish groups that threaten Turkey's border security**

The U.S. provides support to various Kurdish groups to provide them with incentive and capacity to assist the Americans with their military objectives in the Middle East. The U.S. has provided weapons support to various groups involved in the American-allied coalition against jihadist insurgency in Syria and parts of Iraq, including Kurdish militia, using both direct channels, by covertly supplying the weaponry to the involved teams, and indirect means, by channelling the arms through its regional partners in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with PYD serving as the main recipient and composing the primary ground force for America in Syria from 2014 (Orton, 2016). That strategic alliance would prove to be beneficial to the American initiative of countering jihadist development activities in Syria following the outbreak of civil war in that country.

In addition to the weapons assistance, the U.S. has also supplied its Kurdish allies with financial support and refugee aid. The U.S. has historically provided significant financial assistance to various Kurdish groups in the Middle East, such as aid delivered to the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mustafa Barzani during the 1950s and 1960s (Küçükkeleş & Mankoff, 2014). Such financial support would also provide the recipient groups with incentives and the means to participate in the military efforts of the United States in the region. In the mid-2010's, one of the strategic initiatives in the fight of the U.S. against ISIL was to utilise financial measures against the Islamic State group, with much of the dispensed monetary

resources distributed to the forces fighting the terrorist organisation on the ground, such as the PYD, and for the training of the vetted local troops in Syria (Katzman et al. 2014).

The U.S. has also provided support for armed Kurdish groups in other ways beyond financial and armament forms. For instance, to facilitate the formation of strategic alliances with PYD, the U.S. opted to recognise the group as a distinct entity from the PKK, despite its open admission of the close ties with that Kurdish militant faction (Kanat & Ustun, 2015). That move would provide American support for PYD, in the form of giving the group legitimacy on the global stage, increasing its negotiation power. The presence of shared interests, and an increasingly strong demonstration of the military ability of PYD led to increased strategic alignment of the group with the U.S. In 2014, the ISIS/ISIL group started campaigning to take over Rojava, a move that went against the interests of both the U.S. and PYG (Wadhams, Saleha, Stephanie & Jennifer, 2019). That shared regional interest of curbing the threat of the Islamic State to both parties created further incentives for their mutual collaborations. When fending off the Islamic State threat, PYG demonstrated an unexpectedly impressive and skilful military performance, resulting in their gaining the respect of the Pentagon and several American leaders, and their participation in the planning and execution of several joint operations with the U.S. military (Barkey, 2016). Such developments might lead to some people viewing the U.S. as perceiving lower levels of the relative strategic importance of Turkey in maintaining the regional stability and security, in favour of America's new Kurdish partners.

The strategic combat alliances formed by the U.S. with Iraqi Kurds since 2003 have also had an unintended side benefits for the PKK and its other insurgent allies, by reducing the ability of Turkey to control their power. Following the development of strategic relations by the U.S. with the Iraqi Kurds to facilitate the American war effort in Iraq that began in 2003, the PKK



was able to freely establish numerous training camps in Northern Iraq, allowing for a resurgence of their insurgent activities against Turkey, with the U.S. both being unwilling to take actions against those regions because such measures would require a diversion of forces required in their primary war effort and because they feared that measures might destabilise the relatively calm Northern Iraq regions, and actively protecting those regions from Turkish attacks, aspects that provided the Kurdish separatists with safe havens for planning and coordinating attacks against Turkey (Larrabee, 2010). That perspective indicates that the U.S., however inadvertently, has facilitated the resurgence of Kurdish militant insurgency against Turkish territories and borders, by providing them with the environment they needed to regroup and escalate their attacks.

**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**

The U.S. was arguably responsible for the establishment of the KRG, and the thriving of the armed Kurdish separatist groups associated with the organisation and its northern Iraq autonomous territory. During the Gulf War of 1991, the U.S.-led military effort executed operations PROVIDE COMFORT and NORTHERN WATCH, which established no-fly zones over an extended region in northern Iraq and southeast of Turkish borders, which facilitated the formation of the KRG by providing it with a relatively safe and stable area to establish its rule, an aspect that was also exploited by armed Kurdish separatist groups, such as the PKK, by providing them with an ideal area to establish bases for their operations (Park, 2014). The subsequent US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 would further extend the importance and utility of that region to the Kurdish separatist movements. Many Turks identify the Gulf War as the point where the modern regional troubles began, with Turkey's support for the U.S. military efforts costing the Turks high financial losses in terms of new pipeline fees and lost trade with the Iraqi

government, while failing to accrue any significant tangible benefits, resulting in an emergence of a perception in Ankara that the Americans gain much more from the Turkish-American ties than Turkey (Larrabee, 2010). Turkey also views the Gulf War as the point where the Kurdish nationalism movement gained renewed momentum. The Gulf War of 1991 included an increase in support by the U.S. for Kurdish groups outside, but near Turkish borders, allowing them the means, opportunity, and Western protection that aided them in establishing a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq, creating a fresh impetus for Kurdish nationalist sentiments, and providing their separatist groups with a haven from which they could conveniently launch attacks against Turkey (Larrabee, 2010). Those outcomes further enhanced perceptions of betrayal by the Americans among the Turkish people. Such perceptions would indicate a growing level of exasperation for Turkey, regarding the U.S. policy issues in the Middle East.

One of the immediate effects of the U.S. assistance to armed Kurdish groups has been an increase in the level of Kurdish militant insurgency on Turkish territories. Larrabee (2008) notes that the financial and military support rendered by the U.S. to the Kurds in Northern Iraq to allow them to aid in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted in the development of an ideal and logical base for the PKK to conduct attacks on Turkey, alongside providing the separatists with a source of weapons, initially supplied for the American war effort, for use in their attacks on the Turkish territories. Attacks by Kurdish separatists on Turkish territories notably escalated after the commencement of the U.S.-invasion of Iraq in 2003, an aspect that directly correlated with their inclusion in the American war effort. While PKK attacks in Turkey had subsided following the arrest of its leader, Abdulla Ocalan, in 1999, the group escalated its militant activities from 2004, with PKK-related violence claiming the lives of 600 Turks, many of them being members of the Turkish security forces, in 2006 alone (Larrabee, 2008). That outcome

indicated a realisation of the fears of the Turkish people that the provision of U.S. arms support to Kurdish militia groups would directly harm people of Turkey.

The financial and military support provided by the U.S. to PYD has been a source of tensions in the Turkish-American relations. With the U.S. deciding to consider PYD as a separate, and distinct entity from PKK, the group gained international legitimacy and grounds for support, enhancing its ability to undertake its own geopolitical strategic measures, such as pursuing an independent western Kurdistan state (Taspinar, 2021). The provision of the U.S. support to PYD in the fight against an increasing level of Jihadist activity in Syria proved to be contentious to Turkey's leadership. As noted by Barkey (2016), PYD maintains close affiliations with the PKK, including elements such as the military cadres of the PYD, under its YPG arm, having undergone training by the PKK. That aspect was especially worrisome to the Turkish government. Ankara feared that the arms and other resources supplied to the PYD might end up under the control of the PKK and other Kurdish separatist units, who would use them against Turkey (Kanat & Ustun, 2015). That worry would Turkish sentiments against the U.S., perceiving their policy moves as dangerous to the security of Turkey and its borders. During the planning stages for the ground combat operations against the jihadist groups based in Syria, the U.S. attempted to appease Turkey's concerns over the potential for the arms supplied to Syrian Kurdish groups to be used against Turkish territories. While still maintaining its 'no boots on the ground' policy, the U.S. military establishment sent agents from the Central Intelligence Agency to Turkey in 2012, mainly to try and ensure that the weapons supplied by Washington went to only the vetted commanders of the American coalition groups in Syria, and to prevent certain types of weaponry, such as anti-aircraft systems, from reaching the rebellion (Orton, 2016).

Turkey, understandably, maintains strong suspicions on Kurdish groups potentially linked to the militant and belligerent PKK. That suspicion extends to internationally-recognised entities such as the KRG, with much of the Turkish administration viewing them as duplicitous public faces of the PKK (Park, 2012). The successfulness of PYD, and its YPG paramilitary unit, in combating the jihadist threat in Syria further complicates the relations between Turkey and the U.S. The Turkish authorities have held that, the gains made by the PYD and YPG in the Syrian battles against various jihadist threats might promote the growth of the influence and military ability of PKK, which is a major threat for Turkey (Sali, 2021). Furthermore, some elements of the Turkish populations have viewed the provision of American support in the attainment of those gains as facilitative to the Kurdish separatist efforts. By 2015, many Turks viewed the U.S. provision of air support to the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIL as strengthening the pursuit of autonomy by the Kurdish people in Syria, which might encourage separatist sentiments among the Kurds in Turkey, causing them to seize Arab lands and properties near the Turkish borders, making them view the American measures as a betrayal (Gunter, 2016). Such aspects have further strained the Turkish-American relations.

The support rendered by Washington D.C. to various armed Kurdish groups in the Middle East has significantly contributed to the deterioration of ties between the U.S. and Turkey. The policy divergence between U.S. and Turkey regarding the involvement of Kurd militias in security matters in Iraq and Syria created significant tensions between the two countries, as underscored by the decision by the parliament in Ankara to deny the American military's use of Turkish territories to launch a second war front against Iraq in March 2003 (Larrabee, 2008; Larrabee, 2010). The increasing engagement of Kurdish militias in the military efforts of the U.S. in the years after the American-led invasion of Iraq further intensified the dissonance within

the Turkish-American relations. Barkey (2016) notes that, by 2015, while the U.S. was primarily concerned with addressing the mounting issue of the increasing strength of ISIL, the Turkish leadership under Erdogan maintained a focus on ending Assad's regime, through measures such as supporting the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was meant to support the efforts of the opposition in Syria to overthrow Assad, and following whose failure to attain advancements in the military fronts resulted in Turkey allowing jihadist groups access to its territory to convey arms and fighters to engage in the fight against Assad, alongside declaration by the Turkish president that he would rather see a ISIL victory and the defeat of the Syria Kurds rather than the other way round, directly contrasting the American efforts. Such issues contributed to further deteriorations in the relations between the two countries.



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