
Conflict in the Middle East:

The US and the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict

Matthew Dotzler

The conflict between Turkey and the Kurds is once again reaching a boiling point. Following the defeat of ISIL in northern Iraq and Syria, Turkey is now concerned that the returning Kurdish militias pose a threat to its national security. The United States, as an ally to both parties, finds itself in a unique position to push for diplomatic solutions and to mediate the conflict before it grows out of control once again. This paper will examine the history of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the actors involved, and how US foreign policy can be used to try and deter yet another war in the region.

(Note: This paper was completed March 4, 2018 and reflects the state of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict at that time.)

INTRODUCTION

One of the longest continual conflicts in modern Europe is taking place in Turkey: the ethnic Kurds of the state's southeast region are pitted against the Turkish national government in a fight for identity, survival, and political power (Yildiz 2005, 15-19). The conflict is first and foremost an ethnic one; power is dispersed in an asymmetrical fashion that sets the Turkish state as the oppressor against a Kurdish minority (Barkey 1998, 179). The Turkish government has long denied the existence of the Kurds as a unique people within Turkey and has labeled those claiming Kurdish identity as separatists, terrorists, and a threat to state security (Barkey 1998, 181). Decades of conflict have produced a climate where both sides see the other solely as an enemy, something that both parties have used as an excuse to perpetrate acts of violence (Nimer & Lazarus 2007, 21). With President Erdoğan increasing pressure on the Kurds in southeastern Turkey and carrying out airstrikes against Kurdish populations in Iraq and Syria, it appears that any chance of lasting peace is quickly unraveling.

The United States finds itself caught in the middle of this century-old conflict, being both allied with Turkey and supportive of the Kurds in northern Iraq. Left unresolved, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict will continue to intensify and the United States could face a crisis of allies. It does not appear likely that President Erdoğan is interested in meeting again with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) for peace talks. As wars in Syria and Iraq slow following the defeat of the so-called Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL), Kurdish fighters, known as the Peshmerga, are likely to return from the battlefields in Syria and the Levant to their homes in northern Iraq and southern Turkey (Davidson & Said 2017). With a renewal of Kurdish nationalism in northern Iraq following a referendum to establish a free Kurdish state, the stakes are even higher to either push for peace in Turkey or prepare for what is beginning to look like an inevitable war (Morris 2017). This paper will provide background on the current conflict before discussing the modern parties involved and, finally, what actions the United States should take to best serve its foreign interests and retain its allies in the Middle East region. It is essential that the conflict be de-escalated before yet another war breaks out.

BACKGROUND FOR THE MODERN TURKISH-KURDISH CONFLICT

To understand the division and conflict that exists in Turkey today, it is necessary to understand the history of the Turkish state and how nationalist politics first shaped—and then divided—the country. Turkey arose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 (Yildiz 2005, 13). Atatürk, Ottoman hero of the First World War, dreamed of establishing a country that was united, modern, and could stand equal with the great powers of Europe. His dream was realized when the Turkish constitution was drafted and signed in 1924 (Yildiz 2005, 13). Along with this new government, Atatürk set out to create a homogeneous society, a state where everyone within the borders of Turkey would be an ethnic Turk. But achieving a united society through shared identity was an idealistic goal. Atatürk's proclamation that all those residing in Turkey were Turks ignored the existence of minority groups, including the Kurds, who occupied the southeastern portion of the new country (Yildiz 2005, 13). When the Kurds refused to give up their historical identity and remained steadfast in their beliefs and culture, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict was born.

The resulting conflict between the Turks and the Kurds is, paradoxically, both simple and complex. On a base level, the conflict has arisen due to the existence of two identities within the nationalized borders of the Turkish state. Parties on both sides hold different views on what should be expected of a citizen, of what a citizen is, and on the question of unity within Turkey. The people in Turkey have incredibly divergent interests that have gone unresolved since the founding of the state in 1924.

THE TURKISH STATE

As was initially established under the guidance of Atatürk, the Turkish government claims that all within their borders are ethnic Turks and that those who deny this fact seek to destroy the unified Turkish state. The approach of the state and its leaders has been to both categorically deny the existence of any Kurdish populations in the country while also acknowledging their existence as terrorists and separatists. They have created a complicated web in which the Kurds are successfully ‘othered’ and can be suppressed with little reaction from the rest of the population. It is through these behaviors that the Turkish state has adopted a model in which the Kurds are an easy scapegoat for Turkey’s political woes and has also produced a security dilemma for the Kurds.

The modern conflict began with President Turgut Özal, who seized control of Turkey in a violent military coup in 1980 (Yildiz 2005, 14). Özal’s Motherland Party set out to establish complete control of the state and tolerated little dissent. Kurdish political actors were silenced and Turkish sympathizers to the Kurdish cause were quickly removed from the public eye. Broadcasting in the Kurdish language was once again severely limited, much like in past Turkish-Kurdish conflicts, as were certain Kurdish cultural practices such as the use of Kurdish names for children (Ercan 2013, 116). To see that his regime’s orders were being carried out, Özal created village guards in the Kurdish regions to root out separatist groups that had risen in resistance, namely the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). Thousands were killed, millions were estimated to be displaced, and the Kurdish drive for sovereignty was met with torture, extra-judicial killings, rape, and the destruction of villages under the Özal regime (Yildiz 2005, 16).

After Özal died of a heart attack while in office, Turkey saw the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Cowell 1993). Since its inception in 2001, the AKP has dominated Turkish politics (Presidency 2017). Erdoğan entrenched himself as an actor in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and has since championed policies that have only prolonged the fighting. In 2009, Erdoğan’s AKP dismantled the democratically-elected Democratic Society Party (DTP), a Kurdish party, by jailing its leaders and many of its supporters, both Kurds and Turks (Ercan 2013, 119). Additionally, Erdoğan has rejected calls to end hostilities against the Kurds in Syria and Northern Iraq (Metelits 2010, 153). He even made the promise of continued conflict in a campaign speech, stating that “military operations will continue until the very last rebel is killed and the PKK threat is removed” (Fraser 2016). Any hope of unity, an accepted Kurdish identity, or bilateral peace has been dashed under the Erdoğan regime. In 2017, following an uptick in Turkish military action and PKK responses, Erdoğan stated: “Nobody can divide our land. Those who try will find our armed forces, our police, and our village guards up against them” (Butler 2017).

THE KURDS

The Kurds feel that they have been wronged by the Turkish state. Almost a century of abuses, repression, and forced assimilation has created an air of desperation in the Kurds' ethnic struggle to exist. They have had their basic human rights violated, their language banned, and their traditions threatened to near extinction by the Turkish state. When the Kurds attempt to practice their cultural traditions, their actions are met with violent repression and bloody conflict. For the Kurds, the conflict continues as they try to carve out a place within Turkish society where they can be full citizens and Kurdish at the same time. Because they have not seen this realized, Kurdish groups have radicalized and their goals have shifted from living in unity to carving out a nation state of their own. The Kurds have been forced to adhere to what is known as a "security dilemma model." The model prescribes that a state reacts to a potential security threat pre-emptively to decrease or eliminate a perceived threat (Jervis 1978, 172). The Kurds, in their uncertainty of how the Turkish state will react to their advances, see little credibility left in working with the government to secure peace and instead react with violence in an attempt to mitigate perceived threats.

A historically oppressed minority seeking to find a voice on the national stage, the Kurds make up an estimated 23 percent of the Turkish population (Yildiz 2005, 6). Following the end of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds believed they would be able to secure a free and independent state. Instead, the ethnic Kurds were scattered across Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey (Yildiz 2005, 6). Following the end of the First World War, the Kurdish people in Turkey were subjected to cultural bans issued by the Turkish government to force their assimilation into the Turkish state (Metelits 2010, 128). These bans included: forbidding the Kurdish language in public and government institutions, suppressing Kurdish culture such as Kurdish music and art, and even passing a law that forbade Kurdish children to be named in traditional fashion (Metelits 2010, 128). While this oppression has remained constant, the Kurds did periodically experience 'ethnic awakenings' over the next decades, most notably in the 1960's, 70's, and 80's (Ercan 2013, 113).

Even with a history of violent oppression and military responses, the Kurds were able to find a moment of peace and the opportunity to organize politically following a ceasefire in 1999 and Turkey's regime change. While the Kurds gained some small advancement in political recognition, these steps forward were brought to a quick end by the new AKP party (Ercan 2013, 119). By the end of 2009, an estimated 8,000 Kurdish people had been arrested and imprisoned for what the ruling government deemed 'secessionist actions' (Ercan 2013, 119).

THE KURDISH WORKERS' PARTY (PKK)

The PKK originally intended to establish an independent Kurdish state, free of what they saw as Turkish imperialism (Barkey 1998, 23). This goal brought the Özal regime, and the modern conflict, to southeastern Turkey with such a fury that the wounds have still not healed more than three decades later. While the PKK claims to represent the Kurdish people of Turkey, it's important to note their belief in violence and a Marxist style of governance has resulted in many Kurdish people distancing themselves from the group. The PKK has worked since 1995 to establish less extremist policies. (Barkey 1998, 25).

The PKK military was fierce, especially in the 15 years it was overtly active from 1984 to the mid-1990s. The PKK military saw themselves as the protectors of the Kurdish people and the Kurdish identity in Turkey (Metelits 2010, 137). PKK troops targeted villages where the government established village guards, even though many of the guards were ethnic Kurds, forced into cooperation by the Turkish military. The PKK planned and executed, almost indiscriminately, offensives against those they saw as colluding with the enemy or working to undermine their agenda. They attacked teachers, ethnic Kurds, and whole villages they deemed 'traitors' with the same ferocity and brutality that the Turkish military had employed (Metelits 2010, 135). What the military controlled during the day, the PKK controlled at night. Between 1980 and 1990 the conflict only grew worse as the PKK and the Turkish state both upped their aggressive tactics (Metelits 2010, 136). It was not until the mid-1990's that the PKK altered their approach to freedom as many Kurds began to resent the PKK's violent acts (Metelits 2010, 138).

In 1995, the PKK began to evolve. They had abandoned their Marxist rhetoric and adopted more inclusive policies to draw wider Turkish support (Barkey 1998, 25). Although the PKK has since left Turkey, the group has remained active in northern Syria and Iraq and has made small military incursions back into Turkey. However, it appears that in their war against ISIL they are relying on political avenues to continue to fight for freedom at home (Metelits 2010, 157).

The PKK arose from the Kurdish population's desperate need to be able to defend itself. Much like contemporary Turkish regimes, the PKK initially viewed the conflict as a zero-sum issue and believed that the only way to secure peace was through establishment of a separate Kurdish state (Kurdistan). After a decade of bloody war, in which the PKK saw their military actions alienate their fellow Kurds in Turkey, they fled into Syria and Iraq to gain support of the Kurdish populations there. The conflict subsided briefly until the dismantling of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), which initially emerged in 2015 to challenge the Erdoğan regime and gained 13 percent of the national election, taking seats away from the ruling party (Vick 2015). Unhappy with his party's loss and the democratic victory of a Kurdish party, Erdoğan called for the arrest of HDP leaders (Akkoyunlu 2015). President Erdoğan again threatened the peace with resumed bombing campaigns against the PKK and Kurds in northern Iraq (Cagaptay 2015). The violence only continued to escalate as the PKK once again adopted a reactionary approach to fighting and resumed insurgent and terrorist bombings within Turkey (Cagaptay 2015). Most recently, the PKK's focus appears to have shifted from Turkey towards dealing with the Islamic State and working with Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria (Stein & Folley 2016).

ANALYSIS: THE UNITED STATES AND THE CONFLICT

The United States has found itself in a precarious situation when it comes to Turkey and the Kurds. Over the last few decades the United States allied, on and off, with the Kurdish people of northern Iraq (The Kurdish Project). When ISIL exploded onto the global scene and began making incursions into northern Iraq in 2014, the Kurdish Peshmerga rose to meet them (Filkins 2014). The Peshmerga, whose name translates to "those who face death,"

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received military support from the United States in their fight to free northern Iraq from ISIL. This partnership proved incredibly effective as the Peshmerga retook vast swaths of land from ISIL and successfully held their territory against assault (Pregent 2017).

The US partnership with the Kurds expanded to northern Syria when it armed the YPG in their fight to retake the Syrian city of Raqqa from the Islamic State (Gordon & Schmitt 2017). However, the United States' support of the YPG has upset Turkey, as Turkey sees the YPG as a direct military arm of the PKK and labels them terrorists. Turkey fears that the weapons sold by the United States—including mortars, anti-tank weapons, and armored vehicles—to the Kurds will be used against the Turkish regime in the years to come (Gordon & Schmitt 2017). These concerns increased following the 2017 referendum when the Kurds voted in favor of the establishment of an independent state in northern Iraq, a vote that the United States does not support (Alterman & Karlin 2017).

Should the Kurds succeed in establishing an independent state, the United States would be left caught between allies in a conflict that threatens to further prolong the quest for peace in the Middle East. Continuing to support the YPG in Syria and northern Iraq poses several challenges for the United States. Although the YPG has been an effective ally in the war against ISIL, the United States needs to be cautious in making sure that the weapons and training supplied to the Kurds are not used later to create greater conflict in the region. Since the YPG are known to work with the PKK, a group that the United States recognizes as a terrorist organization, the lines between friends and foes are blurred (U.S. Department of State). This support also threatens other regional alliances valued by the United States, and if anti-Kurdish sentiment grows or the Kurds take violent action against their neighbors, it may be impossible to continue supporting them.

Parallel to their friendship with the Kurds, the United States has been a long-standing ally of Turkey. Since the end of World War II, Turkey has cooperated with the United States to serve as a defense point should the Russian Federation invade Europe. In addition, Turkey has housed an atomic arsenal on behalf of the United States since the Cold War, and this alliance has been further strengthened by both countries mutual participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But now, the Kurdish dilemma is testing this partnership and threatening the goodwill that exists between the United States and Turkey.

In early 2017, Turkey conducted an airstrike on YPG forces in northern Syria in relatively close proximity to US forces (Sisk 2017). The United States publicly criticized Turkey for this action; however, senior advisor to President Erdoğan, İlnur Çevik, responded with a thinly veiled threat implying it would be a shame if US troops were to be struck “by accident” along with YPG forces (McLeary 2017).

The Trump administration and the US Department of State both appear to be aware of Çevik's threat and that they are walking a fine line in this situation. Much to the displeasure of the Turkish regime, President Trump continues to arm the United States' Kurdish allies. To get Turkey to stand down, US officials, including National Security Advisor Lt. Gen H.R. McMaster, have stated there will be an effort to retrieve these weapons once the fight against ISIL is finished (Gordon & Schmitt 2017).

Recently, Turkey has continued to strain its relationships with other US allies as President Erdoğan's political and military crackdowns within Turkey brought accession talks with the European Union (EU) to a halt (Connolly & Rankin 2017). With the Erdoğan regime lashing out against both its EU and NATO partners, the United States finds itself being dragged along by an increasingly difficult ally. The Turkish government and President Erdoğan recently purchased a number of S-400 missiles (anti-aircraft missiles similar to the US-made Patriot missile system) from Russia in a transaction that draws Ankara and Moscow closer together (Hacaoglu 2017). There is potential that Erdoğan will turn from the West and embrace Russian support if he feels Turkey's traditional allies will not support him in his fight against the Kurds both within and surrounding his borders. Turkey is growing, and their regional and foreign interests are changing. While their actions are not a full pivot from the West, the United States faces the challenge of rethinking their partnership with Turkey and what must be done to strengthen it once again.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To suggest that the United States is stuck between a rock and a hard place in dealing with allies in this conflict would be an understatement. If anything, the United States is being crushed between what can arguably be called the unstoppable Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq and the immovable Erdoğan regime. Traditional means of diplomacy are at risk of failing. Turkey is distancing itself from its NATO allies and accession talks with the EU are at a standstill. Any leverage the Western world had in nudging Turkey towards multiculturalism and ending human rights abuses in southeastern Turkey is slipping away. The United States is perhaps the last hope for de-escalation in the conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish government. towards multiculturalism and ending human rights abuses in southeastern Turkey is slipping away. The United States is perhaps the last hope for de-escalation in the conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish government.

Turkey does not want to see an independent Kurdistan and it is likely that the idea of one will always present a threat to Erdoğan's government. For the time being, an independent Kurdistan also seems to be outside of the interests of the United States. The potential for Kurdistan to unite Iraq, Iran, and Turkey further would hasten the degradation of US power and influence in the region. Instead, the United States should support ongoing talks between the Peshmerga leaders and the Iraqi government to maintain an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. There the Kurds self-govern, but remain under the watchful eye of the Iraqi government.

The United States also has the opportunity to show Turkey good faith by making sure to get back the majority of the weapons it has sold to the YPG following the defeat of ISIL. While the Kurds may perceive this eventual arms seizure as a threat, it may be the only way to make sure that Turkey does not continue striking Kurdish camps. It also could help to deter the Turkish military from openly invading northern Syria or Iraq to attack Kurdish forces. Retrieval of the weapons by the United States should also be contingent upon Turkish military withdrawal from Kurdish areas in northern Iraq and Syria and for a ceasefire zone to be established along Turkey's southern border. Lasting peace in the region, however, would revolve around Erdoğan scaling back his occupation of Kurdish villages in Turkey and

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ceasing the human rights abuses perpetrated by his regime. It is important that the United States support a diplomatic process and push for a plan to establish peace and co-existence. Continued fighting could prove costly and the United States cannot afford a potential war with Turkey, a NATO ally, nor can it risk losing the Kurds who have proven so essential in reclaiming Syria and Iraq from ISIL. Peace will be difficult to achieve, but anything short of it could spell disaster.

Finally, the United States should levy their unique position as ally and friend to both Turkey and the Kurdish groups in the region in order to facilitate diplomatic talks. Both sides of the conflict are more likely to come to the table if a mutual ally is mediating than if the opposition—or a nation or organization without strong ties to both Turkey and the Kurds—calls for talks. A mediation provided by the United States offers a more neutral platform for discussion to move towards a resolution to this conflict and the opportunity for all parties to be heard equally. Facilitating the mediation process also allows the United States more power to hold Turkey and the Kurds accountable for any actions agreed to as a result of the talks. Additionally, should a party break their promises, US policy-makers must weigh the costs and benefits of continuing to support a partner that is unable to commit to peace.

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict will not be solved by simple diplomatic intervention. The conflict is too old, and wounds are too deep for each side to simply lay down their arms, acknowledge the existence of the other, and embrace multiculturalism. To believe otherwise is overly idealistic. However, failure to bring the two sides to the table before fighting against ISIL ends could have explosive consequences. The Peshmerga and Kurdish fighters have shown themselves to be effective and swift in fighting enemy forces and Turkey has made it clear that they will not tolerate threats from the Kurds. The United States presents the only actor with the leverage to sue for peace. If diplomatic discussions do not begin soon, then armed conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish government is likely to resume.

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MATTHEW DOTZLER is a second-year Master in Public Policy candidate focusing on Foreign and Security Policy. Matt is from the San Francisco Bay area and has lived in Germany and Switzerland. Matt has made the most of his time in DC and has worked in the United States Congress and at the Center for European Policy Analysis. He focuses on European diplomacy, NATO, and is working to specialize in Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East. Matt hopes to one day be a Foreign Service Officer with the US State Department.

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