

## Turkey: A Partner in Crisis

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Of all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, Turkey by far represents the most daunting challenge for the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump. In the wake of a failed military coup in July 2016 – a chaotic affair that caused 270 deaths – the autocratic trend in Turkey took a turn for the worse. More than a year later, massive purges, not only in the military and civilian bureaucracy, but also in academia, non-governmental organizations and the media, have left little of a once-praised democratic model for the Islamic world.

There is more to Turkey's significance for Washington than where it sits geostrategically. In the age of a worsening "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West, Turkey symbolically represents the most institutionally Westernized Muslim country in the world. It is the only Muslim member of NATO and an "eternal" candidate to join the European Union (EU). It has a seat at the Group of 20 (G-20) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and despite its human rights violations and growing illiberalism over the last few years, it is still the most democratic and secular country in the Islamic world.

Yet, there is a growing anti-American sentiment in Turkey. The vast majority of Turks currently see their NATO ally as enemy number one. Turks today have a more favorable view of China and Russia than they do of the United States. Unlike most parts of the Middle East, Turkey has a political system wherein elections determine who governs. What makes mass resentment against the United States highly consequential is the combination of the ballot box and raw populism. Recep Erdogan came to power as Turkey's prime minister from 2003-2014 and has served as president since. He is a Machiavellian populist who fuels and exploits anti-Americanism and complains to U.S. politicians about consequences of their policies. On April 16, 2017, Erdogan narrowly won a crucial referendum by mobilizing his supporters with an aggressively anti-EU and anti-American nationalist discourse.

Recent developments have seriously aggravated Turkish anti-Americanism. In May 2017, the Trump administration, as part of the fight against ISIS in Syria, decided to arm the forces associated with the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD). In the eyes of most Turks, the PYD is part of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), an outlawed military group whose fight for autonomy is centered in Turkey's southeast. Ankara considers the PKK a terrorist organization, and has been fighting it since the 1980s. The two groups, the PKK and PYD, are indeed closely linked, but unlike the PKK, the PYD has no claims over Turkey and represents the most effective fighting force against ISIS in Syria.

There are two fundamental problems that have exacerbated tensions between Ankara and Washington since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. First and foremost is the absence of a common enemy. Terrorism is a generic term and both countries disagree on whom they identify as terrorists. Second, the center of gravity for U.S.-Turkish relations has shifted from Eurasia to the much more difficult Middle East, which has created conflict, since the countries the U.S. considers "rogue states" (Iran, Iraq, and Syria) all happen to share borders with Turkey. The United States places Turkey in Europe, bureaucratically and organizationally, which creates problems for military operations in the region, as evidenced during the Iraq War.

What can the United States and Europe do to stop Turkey's downward spiral toward autocracy? Today, the Turkish military is in disarray, and the Pentagon is no longer advocating a strong U.S. partnership with Erdogan. Although Turkish democracy has a pulse, the best the EU and Washington can do is closely monitor the next elections. If elections are rigged, Turkey will be lost.