At the Confluence of East and West:

Turkey as an Important Ally to the West

Thomas Herburger

California State University Maritime Academy

Abstract

The Republic of Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and has indicated

aspirations of joining the European Union; both NATO and the EU can be viewed as institutional

embodiments of the West and therefore underscore Turkey's Western orientation.  The first

section of this paper introduces the historical and foundational ties between Turkey and the

West.  This includes the strong economic and security ties between the two.  The second section

seeks to identify some of the biggest challenges to Turkey-West relations.  These challenges

include the historically-strained Greco-Turkish relationship and the issue of Cyprus.  The next

challenge discussed is the delicate Kurdish issue and how it impacts the current conflict in Syria.

The final challenge to Turkey-West relations is the erosion of democratic institutions under

Prime Minister-turned President Recep Erdogan.  The section following this describes the

waning of Western power in the vital Middle East region, and how Turkey is posed to remedy

this fact due to its cultural and geographic proximity to the region.  Finally, the analysis section

seeks to provide recommendations to rectify the challenges while underlining the numerous

benefits of a strong relationship between the Western world and Turkey.

**Introduction**

The Republic of Turkey is one of the most important partners to the West. Turkey is a Muslim-majority country with secular democratic institutions, allowing it to be an example to other Muslim nations. Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is seeking membership with the European Union, and is home to Incirlik Air Force base that has proven an essential transportation hub to supply U.S. and NATO war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Turkey is a pivotal ally to the West as it rests near the critical and unstable Middle East region. Utilizing Turkey's advantages to further stabilize the restive Middle East can be highly beneficial to both Turkey and the West, as well as the whole region. Challenges exist, however, in the form of Turkey's strained relationship with Greece, Turkey's Kurdish issue, and the more recent erosion of democratic institutions within Turkey.

Although often overlooked as an ally to the West, Turkey has much to offer given the current geopolitical climate in the Middle East and North Africa region. Turkey is blessed geographically as the Anatolian peninsula connects Europe to eastern trading partners. The Bosphorus Straits, which Turkey controls, allows maritime access between the Mediterranean and Black seas. Turkey can be considered a European nation, with a small portion of its territory being on the European continent. However, Turkey is in many ways not European; it is comprised of majority ethnic Turks, majority followers of Sunni Islam, and is culturally more aligned with its Middle Eastern neighbors. There are various attributes that shape Turkey into a country with similarities to their European neighbors as well. These include use of Latin script in favor of its Arabic counterpart, a modern, free-market based economy, and institutional similarities in upholding secular democracy. Turkey therefore is both at once European and Middle Eastern in orientation, a facet that makes Turkey one of the most important partners to the West.

This history of the modern Turkish Republic begins with the Ottoman Empire.  The Ottoman Empire was a sprawling affair with loose direct control over its diverse holdings which included modern day Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the Balkans.  Once a formidable empire, the Ottomans began to lag behind their imperial European counterparts.  In the 1850s, Russian Czar Nicholas I famously labeled the Ottoman Empire as "the sick man of Europe."  By the late 1800s, rebellions in the Balkans eroded their territory and shown light on their economic and political weaknesses.  Attempts to save the crumbling empire took the form of the Young Turk rebellion in 1908, by attention was quickly diverted to involvement in World War I which they ultimately lost (Finkel, 2012).

From the ashes of World War I and the subsequent dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, was borne the modern day Turkish Republic.  The 1920 Treaty of Sevres imposed harsh terms upon the Ottomans.  Allied nations including Britain, France, Italy, and Greece would militarily occupy the Ottoman rump state, while much of its imperial holdings was transferred to French and British control.  Humiliated in defeat, a rebel nationalist movement rose up in defiance of the occupying allies and submissive sultan.  A young Ottoman Army officer, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, led an effort of national resistance against the allies who occupied the country following the war.  Key battles were fought between 1921 and 1922 and the European leaders sued for peace, being war weary following the brutality of WWI.  The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne ended this conflict and created the modern day Turkish state (Finkel, 2012)

Ataturk would institute numerous changes in an effort to reform and modernize the young nation state.  He acted to rid the country of outdated traditions and dismembered the old sultanate.  Ataturk saw inspiration in European institutions and initiated reforms to imitate them. These reforms took many shapes, such as the use of Latin letters, the banning of the traditional

fez hat in favor of Western-style brimmed hats, changing the calendar to make Saturday and

Sunday the weekend, and even moving the capital from Istanbul to Ankara.  These and other

reforms played a small but significant role in Turkey's tilt towards the West.  More profound

changes took form in the institutionalization of secularism and democracy (Finkel, 2012).

Today Turkey has a population of roughly 75 million people.  Economic activity is

diverse, with an automobile manufacturing sector, electronics, banking, and agriculture all

experiencing recent growth.  Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is estimated at a respectable

$21,000 per capita.  A parliamentary republic, Turkey is currently ruled by President Recep

Erdogan and his Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), which translates to English as the Justice

and Development Party.  It is important to note that an estimated 15 to 20% of Turkey's

population is ethnically Kurdish, with around 70 to 75% identifying as ethnically Turkish (CIA,

2016).

**Literature Review on Turkey-West relations**

The Republic of Turkey has long been an important member of the North American

Treaty Organization and partner to the West.  Turkey's relations with its NATO allies and the

West, however, have at times been strained by differing interests.  Regional conflicts, Turko-

Kurdish conflict, and a shifting political landscape have all come together to shape the current

relations between Turkey and the West.

The impact of NATO on Turkey cannot be underestimated.  In more broad terms, the

NATO alliance has acted to institutionalize U.S.-Turkish relations.  Suhnaz Yilmaz, writing from

the Koc University in Istanbul, contends that Turkey's historic search for security led it to seek

alliance with the U.S.  This alliance would prove very useful, particularly in the early Cold War

era, as Turkey was allowed to grow economically with its security guaranteed by the U.S.

(Yilmaz, 2012). Furthermore, two scholars argue that Turkey's Western orientation is built within the framework of NATO, with multilateralism, humanitarianism, and the commitment to use military power to protect these values central to NATO policy (Kantarcioglu, 2013). The impact of NATO of Turkey's foreign policy approach has been significant. Indeed many scholars agree that NATO membership has dominated Turkey's foreign policy above all else (Kantarcioglu, 2013; Güvenç, 2012; Yilmaz, 2012).

Turkey is one of the older members of NATO, having joined in 1952. Some scholars argue that Turkey believes this lengthy tenure affords them more respect and authority over newer member states. Additionally, Turkey's role within the alliance has proven increasingly vital as a result of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa region. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was a key turning point in this development, reaffirming the importance of Turkey's geographic position (Kantarcioglu, 2013; Güvenç, 2012). Turkey has seen increased importance as a gateway into the Middle East with waning U.S. power and influence in the region (Larrabee, 2008a). Some scholars argue that the U.S. is correct in pulling back from Middle East engagment, highlighting the high costs of such actions (Simon, 2015). Other scholars argue that the increased turmoil in the region requires more, albeit well thought out, U.S. engagement (Fradkin, 2011).

Many geopolitical challenges between Turkey and its NATO allies have acted to damper the relationship. Stephen Larrabee, a senior political scientist at Rand Corporation, has written extensively on the topic. Larrabee argues that Turkey's domestic conflict with Kurdish nationalists is Turkey's primary security threat (Larrabee, 2008a; Larrabee, 2011). Importantly the threat lay not entirely with Kurdish militant activity within Turkey, but also the negative impact it has on Turkey-West relations. This is due in large part to the brutal tactics employed

by Turkey in its fight against Turkish nationalist, which have included politically-motivated

arrests, destruction of Kurdish homes and property, and other human rights abuses.  A peace deal

between Kurdish militant groups and the Turkish government, Larrabee argued, was of great

importance.  He argued that a lasting peace deal, with political inclusion for the Kurds was key

to progress for Turkey ( Larrabee, 2013).  This peace deal has since broken down with renewed

fighting in 2016.  Combining these issues with Turkey's recent turn towards political Islam has

created an atmosphere concern and unease among Turkey's Western partners, straining ties

between the two (Larrabee, 2008a; Larrabee, 2008b).

**Turkey and NATO: Brief History**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is one of the key institutions of the Western

world.  The West, defined here as European countries and immigrant nations such as Canada and

the United States, formed NATO in the aftermath of World War II in 1949.  NATO is a political

and military organization that helps to connect Western countries in a common defence alliance.

According to NATO, one of its primary missions is to promote democratic values (NATO,

2017).

Turkey's membership in NATO was formulated in the early years of the Cold War.

Shortly after the end of World War II, in which Turkey did not participate, Turkey found itself

increasingly concerned about the ambitions of its historic rival Russia/Soviet Union.  In 1946 the

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), sent a letter to Ankara regarding Soviet access to

the Bosphorus Straits (Yilmaz 483).  The Bosphorus Straits controls maritime access between the

Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.  Soviet troop movements in the Caucasus region,

increased Soviet naval activity in the Black Sea, Soviet designs on Iran, and the letter demanding

shared control of the Straits all lent themselves to cause serious concern among Turkish officials.

The Turkish Prime Minister at the time, Sukru Saracoglu, began making overtures to the United

States to keep the peace.  In a speech in 1946, the Prime Minister stated:

> The Americans, who are the youngest and most esteemed child of this old world that we
>
> live on, are taking firm and undaunted steps in the path of creating a peaceful
>
> international order and a united world by upholding the flags of humanity, justice,
>
> freedom, and civilization.

Indeed, the U.S. would eventually warm up to the idea of growing ties with Turkey, especially as

the Cold War began to dictate foreign policy (Yilmaz, 2012 ).

In February of 1952, Turkey and Greece became the first non-founders to join the NATO

alliance.  Importantly, both Greece and Turkey benefited from the Truman Doctrine, which saw

massive amounts of financial and economic aid from the U.S. sent to prop up the governments

against leftist political agitation.  Turkey's place within NATO solidified and become important

for containing potential Soviet expansion southward into the oil-rich Middle East.  The real

importance of Turkey, however, was revealed during the course of the Cuban Missile Crisis in

1962.  As part of the negotiations to have Soviet nuclear weapons removed from Cuba, the U.S.

agreed to remove its own nuclear weapons from Turkish soil, the existence of which was not

widely known.  Given the proximity of Turkey to Moscow and other major Soviet cities, missiles

stationed there were seen as highly threatening to the Soviets. In April of 1963, nuclear-armed

American Jupiter missiles were removed from Turkey per the agreement (Office of the Historian,

2016).

**Turkey as Partner to the West: Humanitarian and Economic Interests**

The important geostrategic position of Turkey has allowed it to play an arguably outsized

role as partner to the West.  Turkey itself has long been an important economic gateway for

European access to Asian markets and vice versa.  Turkey has done well to monetize its position

between the two continents; in 1923, Turkey's external trade revenue was around $50 million,

today that number is closer to $100 billion.  Privatization and other liberal economic reforms,

especially those policies more recently pursued by Prime Minister-turned-President Erdogan and

his Justice and Development Party (AKP), has worked well to accelerate economic growth and

trade.  In fact the first 10 years of Erdogan's policies, from between 2001 and 2010, saw an

increase of more than $80 billion in export earnings for Turkey, compared to only $5 billion

increase in the preceding decade.  Importantly, much of this trade growth has gone to the

European market.  The European Union (EU) is Turkey's largest trading partner, comprising

upwards of 45 to 50% of exports, with Germany being the single largest recipient of Turkish

exports (Neild, 2011).

The United Kingdom, which imports the second largest amount of Turkish goods, has

sought to strengthen ties with Turkey following the Brexit vote which will see the UK leave the

EU.  On January 28th, 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May met with President Erdogan in

Ankara.  The meeting was important for many reasons, including a deal to sell British fighter jets

to Turkey worth $125 million, but also addressed potential trade deals.  The British have been

seeking to negotiate new trade deals, potentially to make up for the possibility of less-than ideal

trade terms with the EU post-Brexit.  The fact that the UK turned to Turkey so quickly

underlines the importance of the economic partnership between the two.  To this end, the UK and

Turkey agreed to form a joint working group to address post-Brexit trade talks (Piper, 2017).

Turkey has also proven of fundamental importance to the EU in managing the recent

migrant crisis.  In 2015, some 1.2 million refugees entered into the EU, many of whom made the

journey by way of Turkey.  The influx of these migrants, many of whom seek to escape war and

crisis in their home countries of Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, have had ripple effects across the EU.  The chaotic and uncontrolled flow of migrants into the EU has been seen as "feeding anti-immigrant populism and undermining EU integrity" ("A messy but necessary deal," 2016, p. 1).  European leaders are eager to stem this flow of migrants into their country, while still maintaining the fairly generous policies for asylum seekers.  To accomplish this, the EU has turned to Turkey to act as a sort of gatekeeper.

The agreement between the EU and Turkey has numerous important aspects.  For one, Turkey will boost coast guard patrols in an effort to intercept migrants attempting to travel to EU territory by sea.  Secondly, those migrants who are turned back by the EU will be sent back to Turkey where they will get the opportunity to resettle.  Turkey will also focus law enforcement efforts to tackle criminal gangs that do business in human trafficking.  In return, Turkey will receive financial assistance from the EU to lessen the costs of migrant resettlement, as well as aid money to help the estimated 2.2 million Syrian refugees already in Turkish territory.  The prospect of visa-free travel across EU countries for Turkish citizens is also part of the agreement (Norman, 2015).  Importantly, the EU has also agreed to a "revival" of negotiations on Turkish admittance into the EU, something Turkey has sought since 2011 ("A messy but necessary deal," 2016).

Turkish membership in the EU has been heavily debated over many years.  Many hurdles exist for Turkey membership; chief among them is the status of Turkey's democratic institutions. The EU requires strict standards on defining democracy that must be met in order to even begin negotiations.  These definitions include standards on voter registration, fairness of election and political process, as well as free speech and other rights.  President Erdogan's crackdown on the free press has been seen as particularly troublesome to EU leaders.  Dissident newspapers are

targeted and shut down by Mr. Erdogan, raising concerns about the strength of Turkish

democracy.  Finally, Turkey is the only country that recognizes the existence of the Turkish

Republic of Northern Cyprus, which was created following Turkish military action on the island

in 1974.  Turkish forces still occupy this territory, which is seen as illegal under international

law.  More to the point, the Republic of Cyprus, which maintains internationally recognized

sovereignty over the whole island, is itself an EU member state.  Therefore, the status of Cyprus

would need to be thoroughly discussed before Turkey could ever become a member of the

European Union ("A messy but necessary deal," 2016).

**Turkey as Partner to the West: Security Interests**

Turkey and the West share similar interests in matters of security.  The Middle East has

long been a hotbed of war and violence with conflicts between Israel and Palestine, the 1991 and

2003 U.S.-led wars in Iraq, and the ongoing Syrian Civil War to name a few.  These conflicts can

be sectarian in nature and have acted in many ways to fuel numerous terrorist organizations.

Current and ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and elsewhere have acted as catalysts for

the aforementioned refugee crisis, as well as sparking humanitarian crises and the spread of

violence in the oil-rich region.  This regional instability has fomented great concern in Turkey,

the EU, the U.S., and others.  Finding solutions to these conflicts and bringing stability to the

region are thus shared interests by both Turkey and the West.

On June 10th, 2014, a fairly little-known militant group took Mosul by storm.  In Iraq's

second largest city, the U.S. trained and equipped Iraqi army who numbered in the tens of

thousands, quickly fled Mosul in the face of the militant attackers, whose forces numbered

perhaps a couple thousand.  The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) made news headlines

around the world with this conquest.  They quickly became known for their brutal tactics, which

included executing some 1,700 captured Iraqi soldiers who had surrendered.  In August of 2014,

ISIL made it clear it was also an enemy of the West when it began publishing videos on the

internet that showed the beheading and executions of captured British and American journalists

(Muir, 2016).

      ISIL became a household name overnight with its violent ways.  Although ISIL has its

roots in the Al Qaeda in Iraq terror group, they had particularly flourished in the chaos and

conflict that engulfed Syria since the outbreak of civil war in 2011.  ISIL operatives and ISIL-

inspired individuals went on to perpetrate numerous terrorist attacks across Europe, the United

States, and Turkey.  Between 2014 and late 2016, some 90 such terrorist attacks had occurred

across the world from California to Sydney and had claimed an estimated 1400 lives.  Included

in these figures is the November, 2015 Paris attack that claimed 130 French lives and the

downing of a Russian passenger jet over Egypt which killed 224 people.  An attack on an

Orlando, Florida nightclub killed 50 in what was the deadliest single terrorist attack in America

since 9/11 and was carried out by a man who was in part indirectly inspired into action by ISIL

(Muir, 2016).  On January 1st, 2017 a lone gunman attacked New Year's Eve revelers in an

Istanbul night club, killing 39 people.  ISIL released a statement saying the perpetrator of the

attack was a "heroic soldier of the caliphate" (Melvin, 2017, p. 1).

      These attacks have spurred Turkey and the West into action.  Following a suicide

bombing in Turkey, Turkey joined in a coalition of countries conducting airstrikes against ISIL.

Importantly, Turkey began to allow for coalition aircraft, such as French and American fighter

jets, the use of its Incirlik Air Base. Incirlik Air Base is an airbase that hosts Turkish and NATO

soldiers, but had not been used to conduct strikes against ISIL up to that point (Melvin, 2017).

This shift in policy saw an alignment of security interests between Turkey and Western partners

in the fight against ISIL.  This example underscores the benefits of cooperation between Turkey

and the West on security interests.  The Syrian Civil War after all is occurring right along

Turkey's southern border.  The West, for its part, sees ISIL and similar terror groups as a threat

to their citizens.  Finding such common ground between the West and Turkey benefits both

parties and draws the relationship between the two closer.

Threats to the stability of the continued relationship between Turkey and the West exist

however.  One serious challenge is the bitter relationship between Turkey and its neighbor

Greece.  Historical disputes and disagreements have at times led to tense situations between the

two NATO members.  Additionally, the status of the EU member state Cyprus further

complicates Turkey-West relations.

### Challenges: Turkish-Greek Relations

On July 20th, 1974, Turkey launched a military invasion of Cyprus.  Turkey occupied

nearly 37% of the island nation's territory, and the invasion forced some 200,000 ethnic Greek

Cypriots to flee their homes- nearly one third of the entire population (Pallone, 2010).  The

catalyst for Turkey's military action was to prevent the annexation of Cyprus by Greece, which

at the time was being led by a military government following a coup.  Ethnic Turks lived on the

island, a vestige from centuries of previous Ottoman rule.  Turkish leaders claimed the invasion

was to protect the Turkish Cypriots.

This episode is one of many challenges to Turkish-Western relations.  Greco-Turkish

relations have at times been deeply strained, harming overall Turkish foreign relations.  The

tensions that exist between the two neighbors have deep-rooted historic origins, going back to

when the Ottomans ruled over the Balkans.  This contentious relationship acts to spoil overall

Western-Turkish relations and is even more noteworthy given that both Greece and Turkey are NATO allies.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who led a rebel nationalist Turkish army against occupying allied forces from 1921 to 1923, dashed Western plans on the post-WWI Ottoman Empire. The Anatolian Peninsula was occupied by French, Italian, Greek, and other allied armies in 1919. When the Turkish War of Liberation broke out, many of the allied leaders had no desire for more warfare, having lost millions of young men in the trenches of the Western Front of WWI. Only the Greeks seemingly committed to the fight, but proved unable to change the course of history. The rebel army prevailed and the Turkish nation was born. In many respects, the Greeks felt betrayed by the Western powers. The treaty on the terms of Ottoman surrender was negotiated. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which importantly envisioned an independent Kurdish nation among other things, was thrown out in favor of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Greek hopes for control over the Aegean sea were dashed; so too was control of Eastern Thrace (Finkel, 2012). Eastern Thrace itself was an important territory in ancient Greece; today it comprises the European portion of Turkey and thus makes Turkey a European country.

The Greeks never forgave the Turks for this historical event. Arguments and disputes over the island-cluttered Aegean Sea further sour the relationship between the two. In the 1980s and 1990s, Greek defense expenditure averaged nearly 6% of GDP, the highest of any European NATO member. The cause for such high spending has obsetsenbily been due to makeup for quantitative disadvantage Greece has compared to their adversarial Turkish neighbor. This lends itself to the great potential for instability in the Balkans region (Kollias, 1996).

This potential flares up from time to time as disputes materialize into close-calls and near-misses. In actions reminiscent of U.S. and Soviet Cold War-era tactics, Turkish and Greek

fighter jets regularly probe each other's defenses and fly into each other's airspace.  Greece

claims ten miles of territory spanning out from islands in the Aegean Sea; Turkey recognizes

only six miles.  The four mile difference has been the scene of countless encounters between the

Turkish and Hellenic air forces.  As recently as January 30th, 2016, eight Turkish fighter jets

were intercepted by their Greek counterparts.  The two sides engaged in dogfights and although

no shots were fired, aircraft in both groups were armed (Khan, 2016).

The water below the contested airspace is also a flashpoint of such encounters.  On

January 29th, 2017, a brief naval standoff between Turkey and Greece played out off the coast of

uninhabited rocky islets.  Tension between Athens and Ankara had been high with Greece's

refusal to extradite Turkish soldiers whom Turkey accuses of participating in the failed July,

2016 coup that sought to oust President Erdogan.  A Turkish navy missile boat entered into water

claimed by Greece, which a Hellenic navy gunboat moved to intercept, prompting a seven

minute standoff between the NATO allies ("Greek and Turkish warships," 2017).

The strained, at time dangerous relationship between the Turkish and Hellenic Republics

worries NATO and Western leaders.  Efforts to resolve disputes between the two have been

unsuccessful and rapprochements are short-lived.  Yet it is imperative not only to regional

stability, but also Turkish-EU and wider NATO relations, that the two navigate the complex

history that has drawn them together in order to move forward.  Indeed, Greco-Turkish relations

have thus far proven an insurmountable challenge to prospective Turkish membership into the

EU.

**Challenges: Turkish-Kurdish Relations**

A key challenge to cooperation and partnership with Turkey is the Kurdish issue.  From

the early beginnings of the young Turkish republic, the minority Kurdish population were keen

to resist the *Turkification* imposed by Ataturk (see p. 3) .  Unrest and violence broke out across

Kurdish areas in the east and southeast of Turkey before a violently suppressed.  The issue rose

again, however, with the formation of the militant Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in 1984.

The PKK began to wage a guerilla war against the Turkish state in a conflict that continues on to

this day.  The conflict with the PKK has hurt the internal development of Turkey, has claimed an

estimated 40,000 lives, and has hurt Turkey's relations with the West, especially the U.S.

(Larrabee, 2011).

The Kurdish people are an ethnically and linguistically unique group whose numbers are

estimated to range from between 28 and 35 million people across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and

other countries (see Fig. 1).  Notably Turkey does not allow people to identify as Kurd; Turkey's

census therefore does not have accurate figures on the Kurdish population, although the CIA

estimates 15-20% of Turkey's population is Kurdish.  The Kurds are culturally and linguistically

related to Iran and therefore have little in common with Turkish identity (Leduc, 2015).  The

1920 Treaty of Sevres that wrote out the terms of Ottoman surrender included a basic framework

for the possibility of an independent Kurdish nation.  Much to the dismay of the Kurds, this

never became a reality after the signing of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (Finkel, 2012).  By some

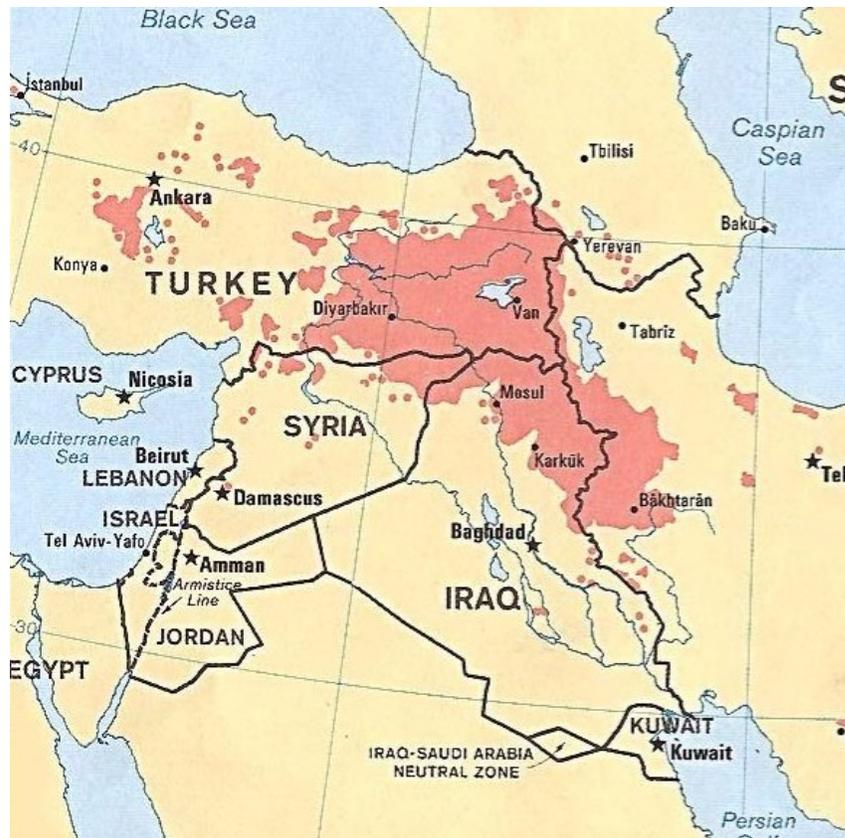definitions, the Kurds are the world's largest stateless nation (Leduc, 2015).

*Fig 1.*

When Ataturk took to reforming the Turkish state in 1923, he saw nationalism as a way forward.  To this end, the Turkish constitution declared that all of its citizen would be Turks and laws were enacted for public education to be conducted exclusively in the Turkish language. These ethnocentric policies on identity and citizenship would essentially banish the Kurdish identity.  Indeed, they would be labeled as *mountain Turks* and not Kurds (Larrabee, 2013). Some Turkish political figures of the era even saw the Kurdish identity as a barrier to true nationalism.  This was seen as particularly oppressive by the Kurdish population who felt their cultural identity was being attacked (Finkel, 2012).

Kurdish identity is complex, owing in large part to the fact that the population is broken up between so many different countries.  However, some commonality among the Kurdish

groups can be found in their recent history of struggle and oppression. Beyond Turkey, Kurds in Iraq were brutally oppressed for decades. The formation of Kurdish identity through conflict and violence is important because it lends itself to the on-going Kurdish militant struggle in Turkey (Albert, 2013).

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Kurds were targeted with great brutality. During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, a campaign to crush potential Kurdish uprisings led to the killing of between 70,000 and 100,000 Kurdish people, many of them civilians (Johns, 2006). Hundreds of Kurdish villages were destroyed and hundreds of thousands of people fled to Iran and Turkey. In one of the more shocking episodes of this campaign, Iraqi troops used chemical weapons on the Kurdish city of Halabja in 1988. Between 3,000 and 5,000 people died from the chemical attack, which was labeled an attempted genocide by the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal (Albert, 2013).

These events helped to demonize Saddam's Iraq, which contributed to U.S. military action against Iraq in the First Gulf War. Importantly, the gassing of the Kurds also lent itself to creating international sympathy for the Kurdish struggle. Western sensibilities towards minority and humanitarian rights help further explain why the U.S. sought to help the Kurds. Following the 1991 Gulf War, terms of surrender for Iraq included the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state known as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The status of the KRG and its borders were further solidified following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In both the 1991 and 2003 wars in Iraq, the U.S. incorporated Kurdish troops to help fight Saddam (Albert, 2013). The KRG has more recently been instrumental in helping the U.S. effort to combat ISIL in Iraq and in 2011 the U.S. officially opened a consulate in the KRG capital city of Irbil. According to the KRG, the U.S. views them as a vital ally (KRG-US Relations, 2017).

Kurdish-U.S. relations have developed rapidly following the arrival of ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Seeking a partner to combat this brutal terrorist group, the US turned to the Kurds. In Iraq, the ISIL capture of Mosul was the result of the complete collapse of the Iraqi army. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces of the KRG did not collapse in the face of ISIL and stood strong to defend their land (Kaplan, L., 2014). This underscored the usefulness of having the Kurds as an ally in the region. Providing direct support for the Kurds in Iraq came about after the widely reported ISIL attack on the Yazidi minority group, which caused a humanitarian crisis that Kurdish forces were able to mitigate. The Kurds, therefore, have become a reliable ally on the ground for U.S. and coalition operations against the ISIL threat in Iraq (Kaplan, M., 2014).

In Syria, Kurdish forces have been perhaps even more essential to U.S. efforts to combat ISIL. The People's Protection Unit (YPG) is the armed wing of the Kurdish groups that has carved out a small piece of northeastern Syria in the midst of the civil war there. YPG forces have been instrumental in the fight against ISIL as they are one of the few organized, capable militant groups in Syria that has pro-democracy inclinations. YPG forces comprise upwards of 90 percent of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is the name of the U.S.-backed umbrella group that fights ISIL (Ali, 2016). The YPG, backed with U.S. air support, has moved towards connecting its two largest territorial holdings to unite it into one. This area is known as Rojave and rests in the northeastern portion of Syria. This stated goal of the YPG caused worry in Turkey, which grew concerned about a unified Kurdish region along its southern border. In fact, Turkey has been adamantly opposed to U.S. support for the YPG due to its ties with the PKK. Turkey contends that YPG territory can be used as a staging ground for PKK attacks into Turkey (Stein, 2016). The YPG remains the only serious ally for the U.S. effort against ISIL, however, and have shown themselves to be able to focus narrowly on ISIL targets and thus

avoiding a fight with Russian-backed Syrian government forces.  According to U.S. Army

General Stephen Townsend, top commander of U.S. operations in Iraq and Syria, the YPG are

"the only force that is capable" (Ali, 2016, p. 1) of launching operations against the ISIL

stronghold city of Raqqa.

The U.S.-Kurdish partnership has proven fruitful in the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003

Invasion of Iraq, and more recently with the fight against ISIL in both Iraq and Syria.  Turkey,

however, is not at all pleased with these developments.  Turkey has labeled the PKK a terrorist

group; so, too, has the U.S. State Department.  Turkey accuses the Syrian-based YPG group of

being connected to the PKK and therefore also a terrorist group.  To have the U.S., a NATO ally

of Turkey, support and provide armament to the YPG is a great cause of displeasure in Ankara

(Stein, 2016).

Throughout the roughly 30 year-long conflict between the PKK and Turkey, the PKK has

relied heavily on terrorist attacks to strike at their much more powerful foe.  PKK tactics have

included targeting state institutions as a way to sow instability which they hoped would lead to

political negotiations for peace.  These targets have included schools and, as such, Turkish

children have been victims.  In the post-9/11 era, Turkey has received greater sympathy for its

fight against the PKK and its terrorist tactics.  In 2007, then-U.S. President George Bush

provided military support for Turkey's fight against the PKK (Finkel, 2012).

Turkish efforts to quell the Kurdish rebellion have been met with disdain from Western

leaders.  Ankara sees the Kurdish problem as a domestic security issue, but some in the West see

it as a minority or humanitarian rights issue.  Lengthy pretrial detentions, arbitrary arrests, denial

of free speech, and forcibly removing people from their homes are tactics used by Turkey that

the West disapproves of.  In 2002, these tactics have been eliminated or their use limited due to

Turkish efforts to join the European Union, yet they have still caused political issues between Western leaders and Ankara.  In 2013, peace talks were under way and looked promising with a ceasefire in effect (Larrabee, 2013).  However, Turkish fears of growing Kurdish power in Syria ended hopes for a peaceful resolution.

In August of 2016, Turkey launched a military campaign into Syria.  Turkish-backed rebels, mostly ethnic Turkmen, advanced on ISIL territory followed by Turkish air and armored support.  Turkey announced the invasion as being aimed at fighting ISIL in response to a series of ISIL-backed terrorist attacks in its country.   Despite this, Turkey also launched military strikes on PKK targets and made advances in Syria to block the YPG from unifying their territorial holdings.  Turkey has dual purposes in its military actions in Syria, fighting ISIL while also countering growing Kurdish power in the region (BBC, 2016).  In its view, Turkey sees the YPG as little more than a front for PKK ambitions and considers it a terrorist group in the same ilk as the PKK (Cagaptay, 2015).

Just as the U.S. see the YPG as a friend, Turkey sees it as a foe causing a great strain in the relationship between the NATO allies.  Indeed, this complicated situation could ultimately be a serious threat to U.S.-Turkish relations.  Providing U.S. arms for YPG fighters creates the risk that the weapons could be used against Turkish forces.  Because of the relationship between the YPG and PKK, it is believed that at least a portion of U.S. weapons could find their way into PKK hands.  A hypothetical scenario in which these weapons are used to carry out an attack within Turkey or even shoot down a Turkish plane would "effectively paralyze U.S.-Turkish military ties for years to come" (Cagaptay, 2015, p. 1).  It is such a scenario that Turkey accuses the U.S. of risking, despite their protests.

The Kurdish issue poses a direct challenge to furthering Turkish-West relations. Minority and humanitarian rights remain a concern for Western leaders. For its part, Turkey views their fight against Kurdish militants as a domestic security concern. With the U.S. forming anti-ISIL partnerships with Kurdish groups in the region, Turkey finds itself at odds with its NATO ally. The potential for this situation to explode is high, with serious consequences should U.S. weapons find their way into Turkey. Restarting peace talks with Kurdish militants is unlikely in the near term and as such remains a threat to Turkey's relationship with the West.

**Challenges: Erosion of Democracy in Turkey**

Turkey has a history of military coups in its recent past. Coups occurred in 1960, 1971, and 1980. Additionally a soft coup occurred in 1997 when the Turkish military issued a list of recommendations and reforms to the government; unable to satisfy the military's wishes, the prime minister resigned and a new government was formed. These military coups point to a fairly unique situation in which the Turkish military, along with the judiciary, views itself as the protectors of the Turkish constitution as Kemal Ataturk would interrupt it. The Kemalists, as the coup supporters are called, seek to preserve the foundational ideology of Ataturk which includes secularism. Therefore, when civilian governments veered uncomfortably close towards political Islam, the Kemalist military leaders intervened. The history of military coups is not only important for understanding the political atmosphere in Turkey, but also because another such coup was attempted in 2016 (Finkel, 2012).

On July 15th, 2016 thousands of Turkish soldiers deployed across the country blocking bridges and taking control of broadcasting headquarters in an attempted coup d'etat by some members of the military. The coup failed, and in its wake Turkish President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan has consolidated power.  Following the coup, tens of thousands of soldiers and

thousands of judges have been detained.  Upwards of 100,000 civil servants, educators, students,

and police have been removed from their positions.  Journalists and media organizations critical

of Erdogan were especially targeted for arrest. All of this is alarming to Western leaders, as

Erdogan's crackdown on coup plotters appears increasingly authoritarian in nature.  Further

compounding the concern among Western leaders, Erdogan has sought increased political power.

This erosion of democratic institutions within Turkey presents the most serious hindrance to

Turkey-West relations.  The cause of the coup relates to Erdogan's own rise to political

prominence (Butler, 2016).

Erdogan rose to power in 2003, promising both political and economic liberalization for

Turkey.  These promises were not entirely unfounded, as Erdogan's early political career shown

him to be open to women's rights and an acceptance of non-orthodox Islamic members of the

community.  In the late 1990s, he aligned himself with a group of conservative reformers who

sought to break away with Islamism's anti-American stance in favor of a more pro-American,

pro-European view.  This view tended to be more pragmatic and Erdogan himself conceded the

radicalism would benefit Turkey little.   These reformers, led by Erdogan, formed the Justice and

Development Party (AKP) in 2001.  After becoming Prime Minister in 2003, Erdogan promised

a new social contract with the people of Turkey.  Reforms promised included an enhanced

separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and freedom of the press.  He even promised to

make reforms aimed at appeasing the Kurdish minority, including allowing towns to use

Kurdish-language names (Karaveli, 2016).

Progress was short-lived, and in 2007 Erdogan began to persecute political rivals,

claiming some of them were plotting a coup.  By 2012, Erdogan began to reshape the judiciary in

a manner that called into question its political independence.  Antiterror laws were broadened to

target his political opponents.  By 2012, some 9,000 people were charged under the new laws.

These people included university professors, students, journalists, and lawyers.  In 2014, Mr.

Erdogan would move on from being Prime Minister and seek the Presidency.  In Turkish

politics, the president had been selected by parliament and held very little real power acting

mostly as a ceremonial head of state.  Before Erdogan would seek the position, however, he

enacted numerous changes to ensure he would be a more active president.  These changes

included that the president be voted in directly by the people.  The fact the Erdogan granted

power to the president before assuming the office would be telling of his intents.  Further actions

by Erdogan, particularly his harsh response to criticism from the free press, would reveal his

movement away from liberal democracy and towards authoritarian nationalism.  Some within the

Turkish power structures, especially the military, grew increasingly alarmed by this and decided

to intervene with the coup attempt  (Karaveli, 2016).

Erdogan and his supporters blame a movement led by Pennsylvania-based preacher

Fethullah Gulen for the 2016 coup attempt.  The Gulenist movement had previously worked in

partnership with the AKP in the early 2000s based on similar interests in political reform.   At

the time, Gulenists entrenched themselves within the state bureaucracy and prosecutor's offices

and worked in concert with the AKP in reforming institutions with the aim of subjugating the

military to civilian rule.  Diverging interests led to tension between the two groups, as Gulenists

launched corruption probes against AKP members.  Erdogan and the AKP became increasingly

impatient with their one-time partners and determined they no longer needed the help of the

Gulenists.  In response to the corruption probes, Erdogan launched efforts to remove Gulenists

from their civil service positions.  The efforts were ongoing when the coup was attempted in the summer of 2016 (Butler, 2016).

Erdogan and the AKP were quick to blame the Gulenist movement for the coup. Evidence implicating Fethullah Gulen's direct involvement in the attempted coup has been muddled by politically motivated claims.  Additionally, some confessions by coup leaders have been made under duress and possibly under torture.  Calls for the U.S. to extradite Gulen to Turkey were immediate, yet the U.S. has said it will only do so if appropriate evidence is provided (Butler, 2016).  This in turn has fueled anti-American sentiment within Turkey.  Claims of U.S. involvement in the coup are far-reaching; one Turkish newspaper stated that U.S. State Department officials were directly involved in orchestrating the coup, and another conducted a poll which revealed that 69% of respondents believed the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was behind the coup.  Expressions of concern by U.S. military and diplomatic officials on the post-coup crackdown has been cited as evidence by Erdogan that the U.S. had sided with the coup plotters.  The U.S. refusal to extradite Mr. Gulen to Turkey only adds to the belief of U.S. involvement, straining ties between the two (Arango, 2016).

Following the post-coup detentions and dismissals of hundreds of thousands of suspected coup supporters, Erdogan and his government set to grant the president even greater power. Turkish voters are set to determine a constitutional change on April 16th, 2017.  This referendum seeks to change the parliamentary system in place in favor of a stronger presidential system. Erdogan and his supporters argue that this new system is needed to ensure stability in the turmoil the Turkey has been experiencing.  The coup is one aspect, but spill over from the civil war in neighboring Syria has left Turkey with the largest population of Syrian refugees in the world. Terrorist attacks from ISIL and their supporters have added to the sense of instability.  President

Erdogan also cites parliamentary instability as a reason to vote for the changes.  He cites that fact that the 65 governments formed over the past 93 years have only had an average lifespan of 16 months, fostering political instability. Greater, more centralized power, it is argued, will allow Erdogan to better control and react to these challenges and keep Turkey safe.  On the other hand, the referendum is seen as a power grab for President Erdogan (Solaker, 2017).

Erdogan already wields a great deal of power and influence over the government in Turkey.  Granting him further powers will only continue Turkey's slide toward authoritarianism, opponents of the measure argue.  The secularist People's Republic Party (CHP) and the Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) form two main opposition parties in Turkey and both say the proposed changes would strip away any balances to Erdogan's power.  It is feared that the referendum would greatly diminish the voice of the minority parties and prevent a balanced approach to political power (Solaker, 2017).

The referendum in question has already done a great deal of harm between Turkey and the West.  A substantial Turkish population lives across Europe and it is estimated the some 1.5 million Turks living in Germany will be eligible to vote.  The referendum was therefore campaigned in some European countries since some of the Turks living there would be eligible to vote.  However, many German towns canceled planned rallies that would have supported President Erdogan.  The canceled events were in response to the detention of Turkish-German *Die Welt* journalist Deniz Yucel.  Yucel had written many articles that were critical of Erdogan and his government's treatment of the Kurdish minority.  Yucel was arrested and faces terrorism charges based on the fact he interviewed a PKK leader.  Germany reacted swiftly, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel calling the arrest "bitter and disappointing." (*Deutsche Welle*, 2017, p.1).

In response to the canceled political rallies, tension began to rise between Ankara and Berlin. When the German town of Hamburg canceled an event that was to be headed by the Turkish foreign minister, the Turkish government was quick to react. President Erdogan accused Germany of being fascist and recalled Germany's Nazi past. The comparison cut deep into the ties between the two economic and security allies. EU foreign ministers met in Brussels in March, 2017, and urged restraint towards Turkey. Both the Netherlands and Austria, also home to sizable Turkish populations, expressed desires to cancel events that supported Erdogan. The rift between European leaders and Mr. Erdogan grew as the war of words continued. Chancellor Merkel dismissed the comparisons to Nazi Germany and said the two countries must remain calm. For its part, Germany said it will continue to ensure basic freedoms including the freedom of speech and assembly, and therefore will not prevent pro-Erdogan rallies so long as they do not pose a security risk (Shala, 2017).

Erdogan's consolidation of power has also resulted in the breakdown of peace talks between the Turkish government and Kurdish rebels. Leading up to the 2015 elections, Erdogan had pushed for constitutional changes to grant the position of the presidency more power as it was an office he aimed to claim for himself. During the elections, many Turkish voters opted to vote for the pro-Kurdish HDP party to protest Erdogan's consolidation of power. By gaining the necessary 10 percent of the vote, the HDP party could block Erdogan's AKP party from forming a governing coalition. This was the first time in a decade that the AKP party did not gain an outright majority in parliament. As HDP members prepared to begin negotiations on forming a coalition government, the AKP opted to instead defer to a constitutional rule that stated that snap elections would be held in November should a government fail to form. In order to ensure that Turkish voters would not vote for the HDP party again, Erdogan and his government reignited

the conflict with the Kurds.  Erdogan undid the ceasefire he himself had fought for as prime

minister.  With the deaths of Turkish soldiers and reatiltory Kurdish bombings in Ankara and

elsewhere, support for the Kurdish party dropped.  Erdogan went on the campaign trail, arguing

that an AKP majority was needed to ensure stability and security for Turkey.  The HDP lost its

10 percent threshold and Erdogan gained the political power he desired, at the expense of peace

(Ackerman, 2017).

The tensions between European countries and Turkey put unnecessary strain on the

important relationship between the two.  Western leaders encourage free, fair, and democratic

political processes the very likes of which seem to be eroding in Turkey.  President Erdogan's

harsh crackdown on his opponents following the coup, and his more recent desire to expand his

own power jeopardize both Turkey's prospects on entering the European Union and the very

relationship itself.  The result has been an uneasy and unpredictable relationship moving

forward.  This at a time when the relationship is even more important given the diminishing

influence of Western powers in the Middle East.

**Deterioration of Western Power**

Western power in the vital Middle East region has been deteriorating over the decades.

The West finds itself increasingly unable to accomplish its missions of bringing peace and

stability to the region, during a time in which doing so is greatly important.  This is a result of the

poorly handled U.S. occupation of Iraq following the 2003 invasion, the loss of credibility for the

West to bring peace and stability in places such as Libya, and the overall decrease in military

power among Western nations.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States would prove highly consequential.  U.S.

President George H.W. Bush and his administration attempted to remove Iraqi President Saddam

Hussein with as little force as needed.  The administration dismissed suggestions of a large U.S.

military force required to take on the task, and opted instead for a fairly small invading army.

This fact, coupled with the lack of a clear post-Saddam strategy, ultimately led to disaster and

quagmire in Iraq.  Insurgency sprung up and within their ranks so to rose radicalized individuals

who would wage a brutal war against the occupying U.S. and coalition forces (Hinnebusch,

2007).

Importantly, the war was unpopular among some in the international community,

including France.  This proved important because, along side mounting U.S. casualties and costs,

the Iraq War grew increasingly unpopular both at home and abroad.  U.S. allies began to

question the validity and effectiveness of the war effort, and U.S. voters grew wary of the

growing body count.  As a result, the U.S. began to find its credibility and influence waning in

the region (Hinnebusch, 2007).

President Barack Obama campaigned on promises of ending the war in Iraq.  Once in

power, President Obama avoided the use of U.S. ground forces in intervening in conflicts, in part

because of how disastrous such an action was in Iraq.  Obama was slow to intervene in Libya, for

example, and only did so after securing approval from the Arab League.  Once the bombing

campaign was over and Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was killed in 2011, the Western

powers pulled out due to fears of creating another Iraq.  Instead, the power vacuum they left only

let Libya to descend into a chaos which bred extremism and eventually even an ISIL franchise

(Chivvis, 2014).

NATO's failure in Libya underscored the limit of Western military power post-Iraq.

Western inability and unwillingness to commit ground troops to secure the peace would doom

Libya.  This trend would repeat itself in Syria.  Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is a dictator the

likes of which the Western world wishes to remove from power.  In 2011, Assad initiated a

violent response to protests against his rule.  Soon the country descended into civil war (Jenkins,

2014).

The Syrian Civil War quickly became a highly convoluted mess with jihadists, Kurds,

Alawites, pro-democratic, and pro-government forces all fighting among themselves.  The civil

war would become a proxy war as well, with Iranian and Russian support for Assad, and Saudi,

Kuwaiti, Turkish, and Western support for various rebel groups.  Obama and other Western

leaders were slow to respond.  The recent memories of Iraq and Libya made intervention in Syria

a political non-starter.  Finding rebel groups with Western values to support also proved difficult.

Considering the poor image the West has in the Middle East, many moderate Sunni Syrian

opposition groups outright refused U.S. and European support, fearing this would delegitimize

their cause among their troops.  Indeed, direct Western military intervention in Syria would

likely intensify the spread of anti-Western jihadist groups already in place (Simon, 2015).

In late 2016, the world turned its attention to the Syrian government's siege on the rebel-

held city of Aleppo.  The U.S. and the UK met with 11 other countries that were opposed to the

Assad regime, attempting to explore the option of using military force to stop or otherwise curtail

the loss of civilian lives in the city.  However, they were forced to acknowledge the Western

world's weak support for any military action against the Assad regime.  U.S. Secretary of State

John Kerry explained that this was due in part because of the risk of confrontation between

Western military forces and Russian military forces that are supporting Assad.  The West's

aversion to the possibility of committing to another costly, endless military intervention in the

Middle East also drove the decision and in the end, the West was unable to impact the battle for

the city of Aleppo (Klapper, 2016).

Exacerbating the crisis is the fact that U.S. and European interests are diverging with their traditional partners in the region.  The Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia seemed content to allow for the fostering of extremism so long as it meant counter their Iranian arch rival.  The potential for the might of U.S. military power to effect major change in the region diminished and other actors, such as Russia and Iran, filled the void.  In the wake of diminished Western influence, groups such as Al Qaeda have decentralized and ISIL came into power.  In an effort to continue combating these groups while maintaining a small footprint in the region, the Obama administration sought to better utilize targeted counterterrorism assets.  These included drone strikes and commando raids against high value targets.  Yet this strategy too carries consequences.  Collateral damage in the form of civilian deaths that occur from such actions have made it difficult, for example, for the Pakistani to continue its support for U.S. operations in the region.  The civilian deaths undermined any strategic gains from the strikes and acted to enrage the local population which in turn added to the Taliban's anti-American narrative (Simon, 2014).

U.S. and Western power is heavily constrained.  This is due to the complex issues around domestic politics and an aversion to committing ground troops without clear objectives.  Sending NATO troops into Afghanistan has proven costly, with no end in sight for the 15 year long war.  Avoiding casualties by adhering to a campaign based solely on air power allows for chaos to fester such as in Libya.  Working unilaterally, without support from regional leaders, creates anti-American sentiment as seen in Iraq.  On the other hand, doing nothing only allows for U.S. rivals such as Iran to become emboldened such as in Syria.  Working with Turkey could provide a solution to these complex matters.  Turkey is a Muslim majority country and has the second largest military force within NATO.

**Analysis**

The relationship between Turkey and the West is one of the most important in the international realm given the ability of the relationship to enact positive change and bring stability to the troubled Middle East region.  Turkey and the EU are intrinsically linked by way of economics and geography.  Additionally, the large ethnic Turk population in Europe cements the ties between the two.  Yet the relationship is not one that comes entirely easy.  The cultural and religious difference between the Turks and their European partners presents a challenge in and of itself.  Different political attitudes and interests further complicate the relationship.  However, certain challenges stand out over others.

The historical tensions between Turkey and Greece is a cause for a great concern.  The two NATO allies are at odds with each other over territorial claims.  This dispute manifests itself occasionally in the form of aerial dogfights and naval standoffs.  Ironically, the two are bound by the NATO alliance's article four to treat an attack on one as an attack on all and thus should come to the aid of each other.  Yet their respective U.S.-trained, NATO-armed troops are willing to engage in a tense military standoff with the other.

Compounding the strained Greco-Turkish relations is the issue of Cyprus.  At its core, the issue over the status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus presents one of the most stark challenges to Turkish EU membership.  The internationally-recognized Republic of Cyprus is itself a member of the EU; only Turkey recognizes the sovereignty of Northern Cyprus.  Cyprus can and will block any attempt of Turkey joining the common European market.  The concerns of Turkey are of little substance in current times.  When Turkey invaded the island nation in 1974, their aim was to protect the rights of ethnic Turks living there.  This concern is hardly realistic in the current political and social climate of Europe.  It would be a stretch of the

imagination to argue that there would be an ethnic genocide in such a modern, European democracy as Cyprus. More importantly, however, is the fact that such assurances can and should be negotiated between the two communities in Cyprus so that they may fully reunify in peace. Such an outcome would be particularly beneficial for Turkey and remove the frustrations the issue is causing.

The deal between Turkey and the EU on the migrant crisis has proven beneficial for both. Where the EU can better manage the migrants who enter its lands, Turkey can enjoy better economic and social ties due to visa-free travel. This deal is constantly under threat, however, and used as a bargaining chip by leaders from both the EU and Turkey. The status of Cyprus makes any meaningful progress towards Turkish membership with the EU unlikely and therefore threatens the migrant agreement.

The Kurdish issue is yet another area of concern that is hard to ignore. Under Erdogan, Turkey has undone negotiations meant to find an end for the nearly four-decade long conflict. The status of minority and religious rights in Turkey is rightfully questioned as a result of the conflict between Kurdish rebels and the Turkish state. It is important to note that Western values of humanitarian and political freedom are set aside to combat the Kurdish insurgency. As a result, the inability of successive Turkish leaders to resolve the Kurdish question stands out as a sore spot on their record, complicating the relationship between Turkey and the West. The issue has become even more important during the course of the U.S. fight against ISIL in Syria.

Given the inability of the U.S. to commit its own ground troops to the operation, Washington has sought out a reliable ally on the ground. The Kurdish rebels fighting in Syria represent the best ally the U.S. can find, as the Kurds harbor no extremist views and in fact have very clear, predictable ambitions. The Kurds aim to establish and secure Kurdish-majority

territory within Syria that they can rule themselves and therefore Kurdish rebels are unlikely to

march on Damascus for their own gain.  Defeating ISIL in Syria by capturing their de facto

capital city of Raqqa, would help to signal the end of the barbaric terrorist group.

Accomplishing this by supporting Kurdish rebels is the most probable course of action.  The

Turks contest this plan and fear that the Kurds will use the U.S.-supplied weapons against their

own troops.  The Turks insist on an alternative plan which sees them support and fight alongside

Syrian Turkic and Arab militias.  Yet these groups are small in number and cannot reasonably

expect to muster the estimated 60,000 troops the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have

readied for the campaign against ISIL.

Turkish distaste for the Syrian Kurdish rebels is not entirely unfounded.  The Kurdish

rebels in Syria have links to Kurdish groups on Turkey that fight the government.  However, it is

in the interest of both Turkey and the West to see Raqqa taken from ISIL and supporting the

Kurds is the most realistic course of action.  Turkey military maneuvers in Syria have brought it

into conflict with these Kurdish groups.  The irony being that American-built, Turkish-crewed

battle tanks have come into conflict with U.S.-backed Kurdish rebels in Syria.  The complexity

of this situation is entirely unnecessary and the Turkish government has little to gain from such

confrontations.  Turkey should instead focus on gaining assurances from the U.S. that the

weapons it supplies to the Kurds will be accounted for and steps taken to minimize the

possibility of them crossing the border into Turkish land.  Otherwise, Turkey's inability to accept

Kurdish rebels as partners in the fight against ISIL accomplish very little.

The challenge President Erdogan presents to Turkey-West relations is a very serious one.

The west has a particular aversion to dictatorships, with military actions against Qaddafi in

Libya, Saddam in Iraq, and Assad in Syria as some of the more recent manifestations thereof.  It

should thus be noted that Erdogan's ambitions for greater political power at the expense of

democratic institutions is most alarming.  The constituents within Western democracies will not

look favorably upon a dictator ruling over a key ally.  As with the Kurdish issue, the Turkish

government's disregard for freedom of press and political rights acts to harm the relationship

with the West.

President Erdogan's political ambitions are further worrisome as it jeopardizes that state

of Turkey itself.  The West has at time avoided confronting Erdogan on these issues.  The 2015

elections and renewal of the Kurdish conflict came at a time when the U.S. was finally allowed

access to the important Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.  Use of this air base allowed U.S. and

coalition partners to attack ISIL targets with greater ease and at less cost compared to an aircraft

carrier.  The U.S. and others avoided confronting Erdogan about his power grab, viewing the use

of the air base as more important, yet this was not without consequence. As Elliot Ackerman,

writing for *Foreign Policy*, puts it, " the silence of the world's great democracies as the Middle

East's one great democracy slips towards authoritarianism has been deafening for Turks" (2017,

p. 1). Turkey has an important history of secularism and democracy, characteristics that can lend

itself as a positive role model for other countries in the chaotic Middle East.  Ensuring that

Turkey continues to uphold itself as a positive example to others can be powerful in and of itself.

Although hard to quantify, the impact of Turkey as being a positive role model for other

Middle Eastern countries is an important one.  Economist Ruchir Sharma, in his book *Breakout*

*Nation*, explains how such an impact might play out.  Sharma notes that many of the strict, social

conservative traditions found in modern interpretations of Islam, such as females wearing a full

body cover, can be found in Saudi Arabia.  The Saudi's and their brand of conservative Islam

became popular in the muslim world as the Saudis gre increasing wealthy from their oil wealth.

This conservative, of course, clashes with Western ideals such as women's rights. Turkey, on the other hand, has far more alignment of Western ideals by comparison. The healthy performance and growth of the Turkish economy can thus act to help spread their version of worship to other, more troubled areas of the Muslim world (Sharma, 2012). President Erdogan's slide towards authoritarianism is thus even more alarming as it damages this image. Furthermore, the heavy-handed tactics employed by Erdogan in crushing his opponents will likely only lead to further instability within his own country. The coup attempted in 2016 is most dramatic challenge to Erdogan's rule, but could not be the last.

The coup and its aftermath have served to tarnish Turkish relationships across the West. The fact that Fethullah Gulen resides in the U.S. fuels anti-American sentiment within Turkey. Where Erdogan sees justice in detaining suspected coup supporters, the West sees disregard for basic rights and rule of law. When the West calls on Erdogan and his government to act with constraint, however, it furthers narratives that the coup was backed by Western states. The arrest and detention of  German Journalist Deniz Yucel creates a causality of Erdogan's crackdown that those in the West can relate too. The political fighting it created between Turkey and Germany, as well as other European countries, has become an unnecessary distraction. Erdogan's invocation of Nazi Germany does little to make him seem credible and only harms the economically beneficial relationship enjoyed between Ankara and Berlin.

Overcoming these conflicts between the West and Turkey is important. Turkey is blessed geographically and acts as a gateway into the Middle East. In recent decades Turkey has become an important energy link between East and West. The cultural ties and shared religious values between Turkey and the Middle East allow it to carry more influence. Western military power alone cannot be utilized to solve the problems that plague the Middle East. Partnering with

Turkey, however, can and will be effective in working towards stability. Combined Turkish-Western diplomatic efforts would likely be more effective than Western efforts alone. Additionally, working alongside of and at the request of Turkey would grant Western efforts in the region more credibility. In the current political atmosphere of the Middle East, the West is often vilified and blamed for numerous grievances. Western intervention in the region becomes fodder for the anti-West narratives of jihadists groups like ISIL which only furthers their influence and growth. If the West instead works closely alongside their Sunni Muslim ally Turkey, this narrative becomes weakened. Turkey grants a level of credibility and legitimacy to Western military and diplomatic efforts in the region, two important characteristics that have been missing from previous interventions. Convincing Turkey to reconcile its differences with the West and focus on shared interests can therefore be highly productive. As Madeline Albright and Stephen Hadley wrote in a Council on Foreign Relations report, "Turkey may not yet have the status of one of Washington's traditional European allies, but there is good strategic reason for the bilateral relationship to grow and mature into a mutually beneficial partnership that can manage a complex set of security, economic, humanitarian, and environmental problems" (2012, p. 4).

**Conclusion**

The relationship between Turkey and the West is vital to the peace and stability of the Middle East. The Middle East, wracked by countless conflicts, is in dire need of stability. In this globalized world, conflicts and instability in one region translates into instability in another. Flows of refugees, humanitarian crises, and growing threats from violent non-state actors are a few among the many problems that cross borders. Working towards finding common interests while solving political differences is in the best interest of both the West and Turkey. A robust

partnership between the two can allow for a more effective response to crises and concerns as

they arise in the troubled Middle East.  Indeed, it is in the best interest of the entire international

community that the partnership flourish.

**Works Cited**

A messy but necessary deal; Europe's migrant crisis. (2016). *The Economist*, *418*(8980), 16.

Ackerman, E. (2017, March 29). Turkey is a dictatorship masquerading as a NATO

democracy. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/29/the-

dictatorship-in-natos-clubhouse-erdogan-kurds-turkey/

Albert, C. (2013). A history of violence: Ethnic group identity and the Iraqi Kurds. *Iran &

the Caucasus*, *17*(2), 215-234.

Ali, I., & Torbati, Y. (2016). Kurdish YPG will be part of coalition effort to isolate Raqqa:

US commander. *Reuters*. Retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-

raqqa-ypg-idUSKCN12Q27F

Albright, M., Hadley, S. (2012). *U.S.-Turkish relations: A new partnership*. New York,

NY: Council on Foreign Relations Press.

BBC. (2016). Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State. *BBC*. Retrieved from

http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060

Butler, J., & Friedman, D. (2016). The roots of Gulenist power in Turkey. *Foreign Affairs*,

95(4), 132-136.

Cagaptay, S. , & Tabler, A. (2015). The U.S.-PPK-Turkey puzzle. *Washington Institute for

Near East Policy: PolicyWatch*, 1-3.

CIA (2016). *The world factbook: Turkey*. Central Intelligence Agency. Retrieved from

https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html

Chivvis, C., & Martini, J. (2014). *Libya after Gaddafi: Lessons and implications for the

future*. Washington, DC: Rand.

Fradkin, H. , & Libby, L. (2011). Last man standing: Is America fading in the new Middle

East?. *World Affairs*, *174*(3), 56-63.

Fig. 1. (2017). *Kurdish inhabited areas*. Wikicommons. Retrieved from

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Kurdistan

Finkel, A. (2012). *Turkey: What everyone needs to know*. New York, NY: Oxford

University Press.

Greek and Turkish warships in standoff in Aegean Sea. (2017). *The Guardian*. Retrieved

from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/30/greek-and-turkish-warships-in-

standoff-in-aegean-sea

Güvenç, S. , & Özel, S. (2012). Nato and Turkey in the post-cold war world: Between

abandonment and entrapment. *Journal of Southeast European & Black Sea Studies*, *12*(4),

533-553.

Hinnebusch, R. (2007). American invasion of Iraq: causes and consequences. *Perceptions*.

Jenkins, B. (2014). *The dynamics of Syria's civil war*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

Johns, D. (2006). 1988 the Anfal campaign. *Frontline*. Retrieved from

http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq501/events_anfal.html

Karaveli, H. (2016). Erdogan's journey: Conservatism and authoritarianism in Turkey.

*Foreign Affairs*, 95(6), 121-130.

Kantarcioglu, M. , & Gürzel, A. (2013). Turkey's contribution to Nato's role in post-cold

war security governance: The use of force and security identity formation. *Global

Governance*, *19*(4), 589-610.

Kaplan, L. (2014, August 7). Why Obama is right to bomb ISIS. *New Republic*. Retrieved

from https://newrepublic.com/article/119014/us-should-bomb-isis-yazidi-need-our-help-

right-no

Kaplan, M. (2014, September 9). Why the US backed the Kurds. *Washington Post*.

Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/09/

why-the-u-s-backed-the-kurds/?utm_term=.96dc14fd9ba4

Khan, S. (2016, January 30). *Turkish and Greek fighter planes engage in dogfight over

Aegean Sea*. Independant. Retrieved from

http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-and-greek-fighter-planes-in-dog-

fight-over-aegean-a6791006.html

Klapper, B. (2016, October 16). US, UK say support is weak for military action against

Syria. *PBS News*. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/u-s-uk-say-

support-weak-military-action-syria/

Kollias, C. (1996). The Greek-Turkish conflict and Greek military expenditure 1960-92.

*Journal of Peace Research*, *33*(2), 217-228.

KRG (2017). KRG-US relations. *Kurdistan Regional Government*. Retrieved from

http://www.krg.us/relations/ Larrabee, F. (2008a). *Turkey as a US security partner*. Santa

Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Larrabee, F. (2008b). *The rise of political Islam in Turkey*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND

Corporation.

 Larrabee, F. , & Tol, G. (2011). Turkey's Kurdish challenge. *Survival*, *53*(4), 143-152.

Larrabee, F. (2013). Turkey's new Kurdish opening. *Survival*, *55*(5), 133-146.

Leduc, S. (2015, July 30). The Kurds: The world's largest stateless nation. *France24*.

Retrieved from http://www.france24.com/en/20150730-who-are-kurds-turkey-syria-iraq-

pkk-divided

Melvin, D. (2017, January 3). *Turkey and ISIL: Istanbul attack signals descent into 'open

war'*. NBC News. Retrieved from http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/turkey-

isis-istanbul-attack-signals-Descent-open-war-n702611

Norman, L. (2015, November 6). World news analysis: Europe has to haggle for Turkey's

help on migrant crisis. *Wall Street Journal*, A.7.

Muir, J. (2016, June 20). *Islamic State group: The full story*. BBC. Retrieved from

http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648

NATO (2017). Basics. *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. Retrieved from

http://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index.html

Nield, R. (2011). Leveraging the trade advantage: Turkey is focused on expanding its trade

with the Middle East to offset the downturn in the economies of Europe. but imports are

growing faster, creating a widening trade deficit. *MEED Middle East Economic Digest*,

*55*(28), S8.

Office of the Historian (2016). *The Cuban missile crisis, October 1962*. US Department of

State. Retrieved from https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis

Pallone on the anniversary of Turkey's invasion of Cyprus. (2010, June 20). *Targeted News

Service*.

Perry, T., & Said, R. (2016, February 4). US-backed Syrian force in new phase of Raqqa

assault. *Reuters*. Retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-

raqqa-idUSKBN15J0CZ

Piper, E. and Karadeniz, T. (Jan. 28, 2017). *In Turkey visit, May pushes trade, mentions

human rights*. Reuters News Agency. Retrieved from http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-

britain-eu-turkey-rights-idUKKBN15C0H0

Shala, A. (2017, March 6). Germany rejects Erdogan's 'absurd' Nazi comparison, calls for

calm. *Reuters*. Retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-turkey-

idUSKBN16D1FO

Sharma, R. (2012). *Breakout Nations*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Simon, S., & Stevenson, J. (2015). The end of pax americana. *Foreign Affairs*, 94(6), 2-10.

Stein, A., & Stephens, M. (2016, June 28). The YPG: America's new best friends? *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/06/ypg-america-friend-isil-kurds-syria-150627073034776.html

Yılmaz, Ş. (2012). Turkey's quest for NATO membership: The institutionalization of the Turkish–American alliance. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *12*(4), 481-495.