

# MIDDLE EAST POLICY

TRANSITION NOTES FOR THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

## Building on Momentum in U.S.-Turkey Relations

SONER CAGAPTAY



In late 2024, two Turkey-linked rebel groups—Hayat-Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA)—led the charge in toppling Syria’s Assad regime, delivering a major victory for Ankara, but also presenting Turkey and its allies with daunting challenges. Foremost among them is rebuilding a country ravaged by more than a decade of civil war. Furthermore, in backing the offensive, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has positioned his country as a powerful NATO ally that could partner with the Trump administration to achieve goals like preventing Syria’s continued export of terrorism and instability, and achieving the enduring defeat of the Islamic State (IS). The two presidents can also work together in the short term to stitch together the western half of the country (now an area of Turkish influence) with the eastern half (an area of U.S. influence) to establish stability—and end the war.

This opportunity is especially significant given the difficult past decade of U.S.-Turkey relations, marked by deep mutual disagreements, especially over Syria policy, and a perception that the NATO allies were misaligned on regional and global issues. Yet prior to the stunning Syria events, relations improved with Turkey’s support for Sweden’s accession to NATO, granted in return for permission to buy F-16 fighter jets from the United States.<sup>1</sup>



(left) Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan greets Swedish prime minister Ulf Kristersson, with NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg at center, Vilnius, Lithuania, July 10, 2023; (right) An S-400 missile system near Kaliningrad, Russia, March 11, 2019.

## Abbreviations

CAATSA    Countering America’s Adversaries  
              Through Sanctions Act  
CHP        Republican People’s Party  
HTS        Hayat Tahrir al-Sham  
IMEC       India–Middle East–Europe  
              Economic Corridor

IS            Islamic State  
NDAA       National Defense Authorization Act  
PKK        Kurdistan Workers Party  
SDF        Syrian Democratic Forces  
SNA        Syrian National Army  
YBS        Sinjar Resistance Units  
YPG        People’s Defense Units

## Acknowledgments

This project was supported by Tony and Vanessa Beyer and Madeline and Michael Silverman.

# Presidential Matters

Strong chemistry between U.S. president Donald Trump and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, suggests the bilateral relationship should improve further if the two leaders can act quickly to address past stressors.<sup>2</sup> An especially difficult chapter began in 2014, when U.S. forces partnered with the People’s Defense Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish force, in the fight against the Islamic State. The next year, the YPG established itself as the core group within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also included non-Kurdish elements such as Arab and tribal forces. Ankara has objected to the U.S.-SDF relationship based on the YPG’s status as the Syrian wing of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is designated by the United States and others as a terrorist group.

During the first Trump administration, an otherwise promising rapport between the U.S. and Turkish leaders was weighed down by the SDF challenge and others. Tensions grew acute in 2017 when Erdogan brokered a \$2.5 billion deal with Vladimir Putin to purchase Russia’s S-400 missile system. The agreement prompted Turkey’s removal two years later from the U.S.-led F-35 fighter jet project, despite Ankara being a founding member of the consortium in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Turkey faced additional sanctions that year because its S-400 purchase violated the 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>4</sup>

Yet after the U.S.-led coalition, with SDF help, defeated the IS “caliphate” in early 2019, Erdogan convinced Trump to pull U.S. troops out of northeast Syria to allow for a Turkish military operation against the Kurdish-led forces.<sup>5</sup> A backlash at home—driven by the broad assessment that the anti-IS campaign was not complete and Turkey lacked a credible plan to take it over—prompted an

about-face from Trump. In response to a Turkish offensive against the SDF that threatened to undo the U.S.-led coalition’s military progress against IS, the administration imposed steel and other trade-related sanctions on Turkey in October 2019.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise a combative global leader, Erdogan chose in this case not to escalate against Trump.

Turkey’s S-400 purchase kept relations on edge, with various arms of the U.S. government initiating steps against Ankara. In December 2020, with just weeks to go in the Trump administration, the State Department announced new sanctions on Ankara—under CAATSA—for Turkey’s acquisition of the Russian missile system.<sup>7</sup> Congress added to the pressure in 2020, enacting its own sanctions under the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on the grounds that Ankara’s “possession” of the S-400 system “adversely affects the national security of the United States.” Congress subsequently barred Turkey from purchasing the F-35 jets.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of President Joe Biden’s term, however, U.S.-Turkey relations had improved, largely thanks to the Sweden NATO accession/F-16 understanding. Now, should Turkey succeed in stabilizing Syria—helping fulfill Trump’s promise of “ending the wars” in Syria and Ukraine—Erdogan’s relationship with the U.S. president could benefit substantially, while drawing deeper sustenance from their commonalities in personal experience. Erdogan is among the inventors of “make your country great” politics in the twenty-first century, and Trump has stated numerous times that he “respects” the Turkish president. Moreover, both Trump and Erdogan recently defeated liberal opponents, uniting their experience in ways that should not be underestimated. Signaling his desire for warm relations, Erdogan talked with Trump less than forty-eight hours after his November victory.

The Turkish president also has economic and security reasons to seek better ties with Washington. A resource-poor country, Turkey has in recent years suffered from an economic crisis, including steep inflation, and requires global financial inflows to again achieve growth. Good ties between Ankara

and Washington have historically encouraged global investment in Turkey. On the security front, Ankara desperately wants access to high-tech U.S. weapons including the F-35s.

Trump, for his part, is seeking to clear away foreign policy obstacles to American dealmaking, from the war in Ukraine to the inevitably complicated transition in Syria and U.S. deployments across the Middle East. In this endeavor, he could have a personal partner in Erdogan and a key ally in Turkey.

## The Path to a New Relationship

An improved U.S.-Turkey dynamic could emerge in the coming years, guided by the leaders' personal relationships and the countries' needs and identities as a superpower and middle power, respectively. Turkey's trajectory deserves particular comment here. Since the Erdogan era began in 2003, Turkey has evolved into a swing state in global politics with shifting views of the West and the United States. In contrast to previous decades, when Turkish foreign policy elites regarded the country as oriented almost exclusively toward Europe and viewed global politics through the NATO lens, Erdogan has refashioned Turkey as a hedging power rooted in Anatolia, which effectively spans Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

More important still, Turkey is the only swing state—different from other swing states such as India, Brazil, or South Africa—that is simultaneously a middle power, a NATO member, and increasingly a global player, thanks to its ability to straddle east and west and, more recently, “global north” and “global south.”

**Turkey is the only swing state that is simultaneously a middle power, a NATO member, and increasingly a global player.**

### Short- and Long-Term Goals

In view of Turkey's role on the global scene, the Trump administration should strive to stabilize ties with Ankara, with short- and long-term policy objectives in mind—among them amplifying America's global power, and engaging in successful competition against China and Russia. Moreover, considering President Trump's calls to “end the wars” and resume “maximum pressure” on Iran, Ankara can play a key role in bringing stability to Syria, resolving the conflict in Ukraine, counterbalancing Tehran's influence in Iraq, and backing diplomatic efforts to prevent Iran's nuclearization.

Before working with Turkey to advance these goals, the Trump administration will need to address the two persistent problems already introduced in this paper: the U.S. partnership with the SDF (to which Ankara objects) and Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system (to which Washington objects), as well as the new Syrian balance of power between the Turkey-backed HTS and U.S.-backed SDF. A grand bargain in the short term—made easier by the fall of the Assad regime—could cover these issues, delivering a breakthrough.

In the longer term, considering Turkey's status as a consequential middle power, the Trump administration could cooperate with Ankara to amplify U.S. power across the global south and Eurasia. Turkey can bring much to the table here: under Erdogan, the country has diversified its foreign policy, establishing fresh diplomatic, military, political, and economic networks to its south in Africa's heavily Muslim countries from Senegal to Somalia, while boosting its existing networks to its north in Eurasian countries from the western Balkans to central Asia.

**The Trump administration will need to address the U.S. partnership with the SDF and Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system, as well as the new Syrian balance of power. A grand bargain in the short term could cover these issues, delivering a breakthrough.**

Even if Ankara and Washington cannot reach full political alignment on some issues in the Middle East, the Hamas-Israel war being a case in point, the following steps can facilitate gains for the United States in its great power competition against Russia and China.

## Stitching Syria Together

By contributing to Bashar al-Assad's removal from power, Ankara helped open the door to a Damascus free of Iranian influence and helped eliminate the former president's divisive influence over the country, which had de facto partitioned Syria between his regime and his opponents. Now, Turkey will seek to stitch Syria together into a more or less coherent whole that can serve as a stable neighbor. This will not be an easy task given historic sectarian rivalries and the country's devastation. Ankara similarly wants to promote recentralization in Iraq, which will require reducing the influence of Iran-backed militias and governing actors.

If the United States and Turkey can now agree on a shared path for Syria, including the U.S.-SDF relationship and Turkey-HTS relationship, it will be possible to resolve the S-400 conundrum. Likewise,

the shared goals of preventing Iran's return to Syria and counterbalancing Tehran's influence in Baghdad will become more attainable. A common policy for Syria and Iraq—i.e., a “Fertile Crescent consensus”—will help facilitate such developments.

In general, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq engendered a period harmful to both Turkish security interests and U.S.-Turkey ties in the Fertile Crescent. Post-invasion civil unrest, the Syrian war, growing Iranian influence in the region, and the proliferation of groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have fostered an unstable reality where, among other threats, terrorist actors can carry out attacks against Turkish interests.

For its part, the PKK—which has been fighting Ankara for decades—has exploited Iraq's decentralization to more firmly establish itself along the border in the semiautonomous Kurdistan Region. On Turkey's border with Syria, Turkish leaders contended with the uncomfortable reality of America's tactical partnership with the YPG, which proceeded despite pushback from Ankara because Washington could not identify any other partner willing and able to deploy tens of thousands of fighters to stop the Islamic State's advance. This partnership emerged as the greatest impediment to a U.S.-Turkey reset.

Anticipating a U.S. military drawdown in both Iraq and Syria under Trump, Ankara has already acted to promote recentralization in both neighbors, starting with the ouster of Assad. Overall, Ankara wants to curb instability across its borders and end the PKK insurgency, or at least prevent future Iraq- or Syria-based attacks from the group.

### Transforming HTS

Such desires prompted Ankara to green-light the November rebel attack that swiftly brought down the Assad regime. Before the HTS-led offensive, talks between Ankara and Damascus had stalled over Assad's demands that Turkish troops withdraw from the northwest. Needless to say, the Assad

obstacle is now gone. This leaves Turkey a key player in Syria—given its close ties with the HTS-led interim government—and Erdogan Trump’s key interlocutor on the Damascus file.

The Trump administration has a strong interest in shaping post-Assad Syria, given its stated aims of degrading Iranian influence in the region, countering Sunni jihadism, and eventually withdrawing U.S. forces from the country. Syria itself stands at a turning point: disintegration will produce millions of refugees and chaos, overwhelming its neighbors, America’s European allies, and even the United States, despite Trump’s likely restrictive immigration policy. Furthermore, the Trump administration has a widened opportunity to advance its own stated policy of undermining Iran, a key Assad-regime patron, by preventing its future return to Syria.

In a larger sense, the Ankara-supported HTS offensive has effectively turned Syria into a U.S.-Turkey condominium, with American influence in the east via the SDF and Turkish influence in the west via HTS, potentially setting the stage for a Trump-Erdogan deal. Both Turkey and the United States should seek transformation in the bargain. Specifically, before working with the SDF, Ankara wants the group to expel non-Syrian fighters, include Syrian Kurdish groups other than the YPG, and commit to reintegrating with Damascus. Similarly, for Washington to lift sanctions on HTS and explore possible future collaboration, it wants the governing authority to expel non-Syrians, include other Syrian groups, and demonstrate greater inclusivity overall. The extent of U.S. leverage over the SDF and Turkish leverage over HTS will be tested by the pursuit of such ends.

**The Ankara-supported HTS offensive has effectively turned Syria into a U.S.-Turkey condominium, with American influence in the east via the SDF and Turkish influence in the west via HTS.**

Trump here can lean on Erdogan without appearing to forsake his noninterventionist rhetoric. Dealmaking between the two formed a centerpiece of their strong rapport during Trump’s first term.<sup>10</sup> The major “deal” Erdogan can offer Trump in his second term involves service as an intermediary between the international community and HTS. Turkey, in this role, could relay the concerns of global actors to the new Syrian leadership and offer incentives for reform that could deliver results and offer reassurance.

Trump can present three carrots to HTS via Erdogan: (1) U.S. delisting as a terrorist organization; (2) U.S. support for international recognition of the HTS-led transitional government; and (3) resources for Syria’s reconstruction, which would come mainly from a fund organized by the United States but collected from European and wealthy Gulf countries. In return, Trump and Erdogan should demand that HTS expel non-Syrian fighters from its ranks and share power with Syria’s various opposition groups. HTS would also have to commit to preventing Syrian territory from being used by jihadists to plan external attacks, as well as terminating Assad’s policy of providing material support to terrorist groups.

## Transforming Governance in Northeast Syria

Currently, the small U.S. military presence in northeast Syria plays a critical counterterrorism role by supporting SDF efforts to prevent an Islamic State resurgence. As part of this effort, YPG forces and other SDF elements maintain detention facilities and displaced persons camps that hold about nine thousand IS militants and nearly forty thousand displaced people, including many foreigners awaiting long-delayed repatriation to their home countries.<sup>11</sup> Washington is also concerned about Iran’s growing ambitions in the area, including a now-disrupted land bridge connecting Iran to Lebanon.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to common wisdom, Ankara does not seek a near-term or complete U.S. military withdrawal from Syria. Such a withdrawal would leave Turkey exposed to a potential IS resurgence, while also paving the way for Iran to reconstitute its influence in eastern Syria, given historic ties between Iran and the PKK, the YPG's parent organization. Indeed, Turkey may lack the resources to control the entire Syrian desert area across its border against multiple threats.

This leaves Ankara and Washington with the SDF option. As noted before, Ankara will only likely agree to work with the SDF if the group includes Syrian Kurdish actors beyond the YPG while also ejecting non-Syrian cadres linked to the PKK. These steps will require U.S. prodding in order to achieve long-term stability in northeast Syria. In return, Turkey would use its influence to advocate a more inclusive HTS that jettisons foreign fighters and welcomes Syrians of all stripes, including Kurds. Indeed, Turkey will be eager to work with the United States and with a reconstituted—perhaps renamed—SDF should Erdogan find success in his recent call for the PKK to disarm in return for amnesty for top officials, including jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan.

**Contrary to common wisdom, Ankara does not seek a near-term or complete U.S. military withdrawal from Syria. Such a withdrawal would leave Turkey exposed to a potential IS resurgence, while also paving the way for Iran to reconstitute its influence in eastern Syria.**

## Role for Damascus

Along these lines, Turkey and the United States could work together, along with Damascus, to transform the SDF and integrate northeast Syria back into the rest of the country, while acknowledging that the U.S. military departure from Syria will

occur on an extended timeline. The ultimate goal would be sovereignty for Damascus over the entire country, including the northeast, which among other things could lead to a credible Damascus-led counterterrorism effort.

Another step in stitching Syria together will be integrating the country's Arab tribes. Under the Assad regime, the tribes in SDF-controlled areas in the northeast acquiesced to the group's control—and YPG predominance inside the SDF—because they did not want to live under Assad's brutal dictatorship. In the post-Assad period, Syria's Arab tribes will likely favor a path toward reintegration with Damascus.

An expanded, more inclusive HTS, perhaps with a new name, would play a pivotal role in a reconstituted Syria. The group has already indicated a willingness to take control of the detention facilities in eastern Syria—even as its capacity to do so is unknown and untested—and to incorporate SDF-controlled regions under central government authority, while adding that it will respect the rights of all Syria's minorities, including Kurds. One of Ankara's key requests from HTS—in return for receiving vital security and development assistance along with Western recognition and aid—will be the gradual return of central authority to Damascus.

**The ultimate goal would be sovereignty for Damascus over the entire country, including the northeast, which could lead to a credible Damascus-led counterterrorism effort.**

## Potential for a U.S.-Turkey Partnership

An ascendant HTS could eventually inherit the counterterrorism role in northeast Syria, and possibly integrate the SDF into its mission. But this would be a significant development given America's ten-year military relationship with the SDF, and

HTS would have to demonstrate its preparedness to ensure U.S. Defense Department support, through steps including: (1) a plan to maintain the security of IS populations—first detainees, then displacement camps; (2) a counterterrorism strategy to prevent an IS comeback; (3) a plan to provide recovery and assistance to civilian populations; and (4) a plan to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kurdish communities. To support this ambitious agenda, Turkey and the United States would need to commit senior-level political and military representatives to fastidiously develop and agree on such a significant, multifaceted plan.

A successful Turkish disarmament of the PKK would make the proposed realignment in northeast Syria much easier to sustain. To date, Turkish security forces have executed an effective counterterrorism campaign at home, defeating the PKK as a domestic threat over the past decade. Accordingly, Washington should consider supporting Ankara's efforts to further deny the PKK operational space in Iraq as well, where the group's hardline leadership is based in the mountainous Qandil region. A triad consisting of Erbil (the capital of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government and an ally of Turkey that backs Syria-based Kurdish groups other than the YPG), Ankara, and Washington could put enough military pressure on the PKK leadership to decisively end its fight against Turkey.

Such a development could also free a reconstituted SDF of PKK influence, allowing the group to evolve into a true representative of Syrian Kurdish interests. Thereafter, Ankara and the reconstituted SDF, together with Syria's central government in Damascus, could settle on a *modus vivendi* in northeast Syria, which would include joint campaigns against IS and other actions.

Nevertheless, a White House deal forcing the SDF to reconstitute itself and recognize Damascus's control across the region could meet resistance, including from Congress. One way to address such concerns would be to pair the arrangement with an S-400 deal on terms favorable to Washington—a

development that would reset U.S.-Turkey military ties, allowing the different branches of government to work more closely with Ankara inside NATO as well as in matters of great power competition.

Coordination of Syria policy would also create a U.S.-Turkey lever against Iran. President Trump will undoubtedly appreciate the fact that Turkish influence in this area would substantially disrupt, if not completely block, Iran's land bridge connecting Syria with Iraq and Lebanon.

Finally, Erdogan would benefit politically from Syria's stabilization by allowing some of the nearly three million Syrian refugees now in Turkey—where anti-refugee sentiment has spiked, creating political problems for the Turkish leader—to be resettled in Syria.

## Preparing for Syria's Reconstruction

Much could go wrong in Syria, starting with potential sectarian conflict between Assad's Alawite community—whose members disproportionately staffed the former leader's security forces—and violent radical Sunni Islamists. Moreover, HTS leader Muhammad al-Jolani (real name Ahmed al-Sharaa) and his group could face backlash from the jihadist right—i.e., al-Qaeda, IS, and other groups—that feeds on popular discontent should the interim government fail to swiftly stabilize Syria and secure reconstruction funds. Follow-on consequences could include deeper insecurity and deteriorating services and living conditions around the country. Syria could thus descend into chaos in the coming year, presenting the world with a repeat refugee crisis, accompanied by the attendant societal risks in Europe and beyond.

All these developments would bode poorly for Ankara and Washington. To facilitate a better outcome, Turkey should draw on its longstanding institutions, including its military, intelligence agency (which has developed close ties with HTS), and civil society groups (many of which excel at



capacity building). Generally speaking, Ankara's influence over HTS should help prevent fresh strife in Syria, where the interim government includes many Turkey-linked figures, such as Foreign Minister Hassan al-Shibani, who received his doctorate from a Turkish university while living in the country as a refugee. Moreover, perhaps millions of Syrians, whether refugees in Turkey or those living in Turkish-controlled areas, are now conversant in Turkish. Together with a vast network of Turkish NGOs serving these Syrian demographics—nearly half the country's prewar population—Turkey enjoys more soft power in post-Assad Syria, and among the country's various political circles, than any other nation.

Trump can accordingly lean on Turkey to stabilize Syria and also to prevent Iran from rebuilding its influence in the country. European countries, which would suffer most from Syria's destabilization and fresh refugee flows, will be motivated to help with Syria's reconstruction and can be persuaded to provide funding. Turkey has already invited wealthy Gulf monarchies, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, to fund and otherwise aid in the country's reconstruction. In other words, the United States need not shoulder the majority of the cost to stabilize and rebuild Syria.

Trump would have to step in, however, to prevent potentially escalating tensions between Turkey and Israel, two U.S. allies that have been nervously watching each other's Syria policies—e.g., Turkey building influence in Damascus and empowering conservative Islamists, and Israel establishing contacts with the YPG and with actors in Syria's south, among other fissure points. To this end, Trump can rely on Jordan and its king, Abdullah II, to establish a virtual cordon sanitaire between Turkey and Israel in Syria. The monarch can also facilitate a direct line of communication between Erdogan and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

## A Common Iraq Policy

Ankara's strategy for Iraq—which boils down to promoting Turkish money over Iranian guns—is more straightforward and therefore more likely to receive stronger, more direct backing from the Trump administration. As in Syria, Turkey has done the preparatory work to advance its policy in Iraq, beginning with a proposed trade network called the Development Road that would travel across Iraq and Turkey, connecting Asian and European markets via the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea.<sup>13</sup> Initially, the project ran counter to the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a U.S.-proposed route stretching from India through the Arabian Peninsula and Levant into Europe. But the Gaza war and Houthi maritime attacks have raised security concerns about commercial shipping through the Red Sea, boosting prospects for the Development Road at IMEC's expense.<sup>14</sup> Backed by Gulf money, the Development Road could see its first routes open as soon as 2027, according to Turkish policymakers.

Iran remains the most influential country in Iraq, and while U.S.-Turkey cooperation will help on some issues, it will not resolve all the Trump administration's inevitable concerns regarding Tehran's influence. Nevertheless, Washington should consider throwing its support behind Turkey's Development Road initiative, particularly if it wants to counterbalance Iranian influence in Iraq following a full or partial U.S. withdrawal from the country.

# S-400s for F-35s

Successful short-term U.S.-Turkey cooperation in Iraq and Syria should build enough presidential chemistry to eventually reset bilateral military ties regarding the S-400 and F-35 issues. As the situation stands, according to the U.S. congressional NDAA mentioned earlier, if Turkey remains in “possession of the [S-400 missile defense] system on its territory,” it will not receive F-35 fighter jets. Turkey has yet to activate the system, which it purchased in 2019, but Erdogan will not want to lose face by returning it to Russia. Still, there may be a way to thread the needle, building on momentum created by cooperation in Syria specifically. Thus, the Trump administration should consider working with Congress to amend the legislation punishing Turkey—e.g., by replacing “possession” of the Russian-developed defense system with “non-use.”

Erdogan could agree to a deal whereby the S-400 system would remain inactivated in Turkish custody. In this arrangement, Washington could enjoy access to verify non-activation, and also the tools to technically exploit the system through a non-public part of the deal. The sweetener would be Washington’s openness to restart talks on Turkish acquisition of the F-35 fifth-generation aircraft, coveted by Ankara ever since Turkey’s 2019 ejection from the U.S.-led consortium. This may, however, be a tall order given likely congressional objections and pushback from American allies in Athens and Jerusalem. The U.S. defense community would also raise objections, citing concerns over Ankara’s ability to safeguard the F-35 platform given Turkey’s relationship with Russia. Trump should therefore demand further Turkish actions to demonstrate that it can effectively protect the technology. He could also ask Erdogan to bolster Turkey’s dialogue with Greece and consider a *détente* with Israel (both discussed below).



# Economic Cooperation and a Common Europe Policy

The Trump administration could consider encouraging Congress to promote a broad reset in U.S.-Turkey military ties, given that such a reset could enable deeper economic cooperation, with middle- and long-term benefits. The Development Road could be a first option, followed closely by the Trans-Caspian International Transit Route, aka Middle Corridor—which travels from central Asia to the Mediterranean and Europe via Turkey. The Middle Corridor found new life in the aftermath of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which has reduced the appeal of the traditional Northern Corridor running across Russia. Armenia, Greece, and the European Union could also serve as venues for productive U.S.-Turkey cooperation.

**Armenia.** With respect to the Middle Corridor, the United States should continue to encourage Armenia’s normalization processes with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Successful resets would integrate Armenia into this transit route, rendering it territorially contiguous, while also reducing Yerevan’s reliance on Moscow. Further, normalization could help spin Armenia out of Iran’s orbit and nudge it toward Washington, while advancing the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy against Tehran. In Washington, Turkey-Armenia normalization would help the administration reset military ties with Turkey by appealing to Armenia-sympathetic members of Congress as well as legislators critical of Turkey.

**Greece.** Washington should support a deepening of the recent dialogue launched by Erdogan and

Greece’s prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, to solve bilateral maritime disputes. Progress there could help reset bilateral ties more broadly. It could also bolster the Middle Corridor as it runs through Greece, building economic interdependency that mitigates the countries’ historic animosity and especially the threat posed by Turkey. Coupled with the maritime dialogue, advancement of the Middle Corridor via Greece could assuage Greece-sympathetic members of Congress who object to selling the F-35s to Turkey.

**EU.** Pipelines and trade routes connecting the Indian Ocean and central Asia with Europe via Turkey and Greece would serve as the foundation for a revitalized Turkey-EU relationship focused on deeper trade and economic integration. While Turkey’s accession to the EU has become moot in recent years, fundamental economic ties, including a 1995 Customs Union, still drive Turkey-EU relations. To this end, Ankara wants to modernize the union by adding services to the industrial goods currently covered under its tariff-free regime.

Ankara already has key allies in Europe that support deeper ties between Turkey and the EU, including Italy, Spain, and Poland. For its own part, Washington should encourage talks between Ankara and Brussels to achieve an upgraded Customs Union, which would not only benefit the economies of Turkey and EU member states but also anchor Turkey more deeply in the West economically. This would build on an existing pattern whereby Turkey is more closely linked to the West by economic rather than political ties.

What is more, given Ankara’s reliance on financial flows from Western markets and its trade with the EU—which still accounts for more than half of Turkey’s total foreign trade—tying Turkey to the West economically should provide the Trump administration with an ally in its great power competition against China specifically. Meanwhile, Ankara could ally with the United States on European matters inside NATO (discussed below) and also across Europe as a key player on the continent.

# Ending the Ukraine War

A main area for U.S.-Turkey cooperation in Europe will be Ukraine. Ankara's overall stance on the war can be described as nonbinary—supporting Ukraine militarily but keeping open economic ties with Russia. This has helped Turkey maintain communication channels with both sides perhaps with a future ceasefire role in mind. Trump has stated his intention to end the war, and Erdogan would gladly occupy center stage in ceasefire talks between Moscow and Kyiv. Erdogan is among the few leaders globally who can engage the Russian and Ukrainian presidents alike, potentially helping bring the two together in a Trump-led ceasefire initiative.

Beyond his anticipation of a mediating role, Erdogan has charted a dual course on the Ukraine war out of political instinct, with an eye to keeping Russian money flowing during election cycles. Moreover, he likely shares the broad view of Turkish security elites that the United States no longer has Turkey's back, as imprinted by the 2014 U.S. partnership with the YPG. Two years later, moreover, President Obama delayed his outreach to Erdogan after the failed coup attempt, whereas Putin contacted the Turkish leader the next day. Putin then invited Erdogan to St. Petersburg, Russia's imperial capital, and offered him a regal welcome and sense of safety two weeks after the attempt on his life.

In the ensuing years, Ankara and Moscow have entered into power-sharing deals in conflict areas such as Syria, the South Caucasus, and Libya. But they are competitors, not allies, as demonstrated by recent events in Syria, and this dynamic can coexist with Ankara's continued willingness to help U.S. entities compete against Russian influence—irrespective of the Trump administration's

likely more transactional approach to Russia than its predecessor. In the Balkans, central Asia, and Africa, Turkish businesses and institutions could thus help their U.S. counterparts facilitate revenue and cut costs, while serving as overall savvy partners. All this, of course, will hinge on the earlier-noted military reset.

## Cooperation in Central Asia, the Western Balkans, and Africa

Just as a U.S.-Turkey military reset could persuade skeptics in Washington to look more favorably on the future bilateral relationship, it could also encourage doubters in Ankara that the United States—working through its financial institutions—can complement Turkish efforts in places like central Asia, the western Balkans, and Africa, specifically in the context of its competition with Russia.

**Central Asia.** While Russia's clout has diminished in central Asia during the Ukraine war, Turkey has built on its existing soft power initiatives in this region—a role informed by linguistic and ethnic ties. Such efforts played a key role in the establishment in 2021 of the Organization of Turkic States, which gathers Turkey, five central Asian countries, and Hungary under a political umbrella for the first time. On a commercial level, Ankara has leveraged its business and energy relationships to become a major player in the region, together with Russia and China. Ankara is a critical defense partner for central Asian nations, with all the states in the region having acquired Turkish drones. Significant Turkish trade ties in central Asia are reflected in the country's status as Azerbaijan's second investment

partner and Turkmenistan’s second trade partner.

**Western Balkans.** In the western Balkans, too, Erdogan has worked to enhance Turkey’s existing soft power initiatives, taking advantage of the perceived EU snubbing of regional states’ aspirations to join the Union.<sup>15</sup> Activity has encompassed governmental and semi-governmental agencies, including:

- Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs)
- TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, involved in foreign aid)
- Turkish Airlines (national flag carrier)
- TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation)
- Baykar (producer of Turkey’s famed drones)

Other Turkish businesses have boosted their presence in this region as well, positioning Ankara as a leading player in the western Balkans, often just behind the EU. Accordingly, Turkey is among the key investors in most western Balkan states, including Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Alongside Ankara’s defense partnerships with all the western Balkan states, this activity makes Turkey a vital player in this region, providing the Trump administration an avenue to counterbalance Chinese as well as Russian influence. Dynamics here include Russia’s longtime role in Serbia, where China has also made inroads in recent years, and the religious nature of Turkey’s activity in the region, which does not always sit well with residents.

**Africa.** Whereas Erdogan has boosted Turkey’s existing soft power initiatives in central Asia and the Balkans, he can claim almost exclusive credit for similar developments in the Muslim-majority and plurality states of Africa, including in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Over the past two decades, Turkey’s aggressive outreach on the continent has positioned it as a rising competitor of Russia and China as well as France, which has seen its traditional influence wane. Turkish efforts have covered:

- **Diplomacy**—establishment of dozens of new missions

- **Commerce**—Turkish Airlines flights from Istanbul to nearly every African capital
- **Military**—drone sales and defense treaties with more than a dozen states
- **Culture**—grants, scholarships, and exchange programs, along with the construction of schools and mosques
- **Politics**—regular pan-African summits, and Erdogan’s hosting of African leaders individually, in some cases multiple times a year

Turkey’s “parity” with China should not be overstated, however. Ankara’s investments across the continent, although substantial relative to the pre-Erdogan era, are still small compared to those of Beijing. But Turkey’s drone sales to several African countries are extraordinary, having effectively revolutionized the defense capabilities of Chad, Niger, Mali, and others. Several African nations maintain drone arsenals that are exclusively Turkish in origin. And even if questionable practices such as the lack of end-user agreements for Turkish drone sales have raised concerns in Western capitals, Ankara could—given the alternatives—serve as a partner for Washington in its competition against Russia and China on the continent.<sup>16</sup> This is true even though Turkey’s activities in Africa, as in Eurasia, can draw criticism for their religious content.



# China Policy

None of this analysis suggests Ankara will selflessly commit itself to promoting U.S. interests around the globe. Judging from its past behavior, Ankara will instead compartmentalize its ties with great powers including the United States, likely courting America primarily for military and security cooperation, while wooing the EU, Russia, and China for financial and investment inflows.

Turkey's swing-state policy could face the most turbulence with China. Specifically, despite Ankara's efforts to curry favor with Beijing for investment choices, China has picked Greece as its key Belt and Road Initiative partner in the East Mediterranean, and Chinese investments in Turkey have been anemic at best. China here is likely motivated by awareness of deep Turkish connections to the Muslim Uyghur community in the Xinjiang region. Turkey itself hosts the largest Uyghur community outside China, and while Ankara has so far tamped down public criticism of Chinese mistreatment of the Uyghur population, Beijing appears to recognize the latent threat.

Nevertheless, China also recognizes Turkey's swing state position in global politics, and Turkey will continue to welcome Chinese investment opportunities. To this end, a recent Chinese commitment to invest \$1 billion in Turkey to build a plant for China's BYD electric car company could be a hook to keep Ankara engaged. This suggests that should the Trump administration confront China on trade issues or President Xi challenge the U.S. position on Taiwan, Ankara may decide to hedge, much as it has done during the Ukraine war.

**None of this analysis suggests Ankara will selflessly commit itself to promoting U.S. interests around the globe. Judging from its past behavior, Ankara will instead compartmentalize its ties with great powers including the United States.**

# Iran Policy

Should Trump order a military campaign targeting Iran, Ankara would likely stay on the sidelines, given the countries' longtime power parity arrangement, while perhaps taking quiet satisfaction in the blows to its competitor. Recent Turkish alarm over Iran's behavior has focused on Iraq, where Iran has funded the PKK-aligned Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS). Therefore, oblique future statements "condemning the use of force" by America will not tell the full story, even as Turkey would react more loudly to an Israeli attack on Iran.

Meanwhile, although Ankara certainly will not participate in a U.S.-led campaign targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure or other military facilities, Erdogan could conceivably join an economic "maximum pressure" campaign against the Islamic Republic, especially if Trump courts him by signaling flexibility on the potential U.S. sale of F-35 jets.

Should a diplomatic initiative emerge to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear breakout, however, Ankara would be an advocate, based on its view that a nuclear Iran would pose the greatest threat to the nations' power parity, in turn upending the equilibrium in Iraq, Syria, and all other theaters. Thus, in Iran diplomacy, Trump will find an enthusiastic partner in Erdogan.

**Should Trump order a military campaign targeting Iran, Ankara would likely stay on the sidelines, given the countries' longtime power parity arrangement, while perhaps taking quiet satisfaction in the blows to its competitor.**

# Potential Risk Areas

Areas of risk in the U.S.-Turkey relationship can be found in Ankara's own power aspirations, domestic Turkish politics, American politics, and Israel.

**Turkey's great power game.** In its role as a swing state, Turkey deals with all the world's powers (China, the EU, Russia, and the United States), inevitably creating the possibility of conflict. Ankara also compartmentalizes: It hosts a Uyghur diaspora while wooing Chinese investments; provides military support to Ukraine while pursuing Russian money; plans for security and economic cooperation with the United States while disagreeing with Washington on issues concerning the global south and the Gaza war; and pursues deeper economic integration with the EU while competing against the Union in the western Balkans. Notwithstanding the personal chemistry between Trump and Erdogan, problems in the bilateral relationship could emerge on matters such as nonalignment on China.

**Turkish politics.** Erdogan's current term as president ends in 2028, and although current law prevents him from running again, it is an open secret that he wants to change the country's constitution to stay in power. In the past, Erdogan has polarized Turkish politics to boost his support during election cycles, and weak opponents have helped him to victory. Erdogan, however, faces an apparently stronger future challenger in Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, a member of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). The popular Imamoglu has appealed to conservative and liberal voters alike, allowing him to build a broader coalition in Istanbul than that assembled by Erdogan nationally. Erdogan may pursue various strategies to undermine Imamoglu's stature, such

as court cases targeting his character, and a strong Trump-Erdogan relationship should spare the Turkish leader U.S. presidential criticism of his domestic record. Still, the bilateral relationship could come under congressional scrutiny.

Alternatively, should Erdogan's opening toward the PKK succeed, increased cultural rights might follow for Turkey's Kurdish community, potentially improving the government's standing in the eyes of Congress. Similarly, Turkish-Armenian normalization and further dialogue between Ankara and Athens could dilute congressional critiques of Turkey and Erdogan.

**U.S. politics.** On the American side, too, various factors could complicate a stabilized relationship with Turkey, starting with a more critical Congress. Voices within the executive branch will also be critical of Ankara. At times, Trump and Erdogan themselves will need to personally step in to avert tensions or crises in bilateral ties.

**Israel.** Turkey's complete support for Hamas and the Palestinians against Israel will be an area of tension between Erdogan and Trump, but the Turkish president will not likely go so far as to rupture his country's ties with Israel. While Ankara has slapped Israel with trade sanctions, it has allowed trade to continue through third parties, such as Greece and the Palestinian Authority, and maintained diplomatic ties with Israel.<sup>17</sup> Ankara is charting this course because it wants to be part of the Gaza Strip's postwar administration, even though Israel will certainly block any such role in light of Ankara's strong support for Hamas.

Keeping Turkish relations with Israel afloat will require work from Trump, relying on his rapport with both Erdogan and Netanyahu. To this end, the U.S. president could pursue a *détente* between the two states, which on the Turkish side would require denying safe haven to Hamas, even as Turkey retains its pro-Palestinian stance vis-à-vis Israel. For Israel, such an arrangement would mean lifting its objections to America's F-35 sale to Ankara. But

deep mutual suspicions among Turkish and Israeli elites could render such an arrangement impracticable. A less ambitious Trump deal might include U.S.-vetted Turkish NGOs playing a role in Gaza's reconstruction in return for Turkey pulling out of the International Criminal Court case that led to the November 2024 arrest warrant for Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, the former Israeli defense minister. To be sure, even a pared-down arrangement like this might prove unlikely given Israeli suspicion over Turkey's ties to Islamist actors such as HTS in Syria. Moreover, a future Israeli attack on Iran could draw harsh criticism from Turkey.

## Promoting U.S.-Turkey Dialogue on Multiple Levels

To facilitate a productive, stable relationship with Turkey, the United States will have to keep lines of discussion open on military and trade issues, while reaping the benefits of close personal coordination between Trump and Erdogan.

**Military dialogue.** Even after a military reset, open lines of communication and frequent contacts between military leaders will be necessary to sustain ties, considering the bad blood among the rank and file caused by the SDF and S-400 issues. This includes regular high-level visits, exchange and visitor programs for rising officers in both militaries, and the appointment of high-ranking liaison officers, including in commands responsible for fighting the PKK and Islamic State.

**Trade dialogue.** Such communication, which has improved significantly of late, will be necessary to promote deeper economic ties and absorb future shocks to the bilateral relationship. Turkey, which is trying to decrease its dependence on Russian and Iranian natural gas, has already become the second-largest European importer of liquefied natural gas from the United States. Washington and Ankara could also enhance their dialogue on commercial-use nuclear energy; Turkey, which already has one Russian-built nuclear power station, is seeking to build two more. And they could coordinate more closely on infrastructure projects in Africa and Eurasia, with U.S. banks providing funding and credit to Turkish institutions and NGOs.

**Presidential dialogue.** The relationship between the two principals will likely be the greatest asset for bilateral ties, potentially allowing Trump and Erdogan to settle differences early on in the U.S. administration. Given the outsize role this personal connection could play in addressing issues from the S-400 system and F-35s to Syria and Israel, Washington and Ankara should prioritize holding regular presidential-level meetings and maintaining open communication.

The relationship between the two principals will likely be the greatest asset for bilateral ties, potentially allowing Trump and Erdogan to settle differences early on in the U.S. administration.



# Core Policy Recommendations

The second Trump administration should prioritize these four general items to maintain good ties with Ankara and advance U.S. interests:

- **Resolve differences over S-400s, Syria, and the future of the SDF.** During Trump's first term, mutual disagreements between Washington and Ankara over Syria policy and Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 defense system weighed on the rapport between the two presidents, preventing it from reaching its full potential. This time around, the leaders should act swiftly to resolve these issues by coordinating policy on Syria—with Washington encouraging inclusivity from the SDF, and Ankara urging the same from HTS—and then reaching a mutually acceptable arrangement on the S-400 system.
- **Strengthen bilateral ties, then go global.** Cooperation with Ankara on the international stage can only thrive once the two governments bolster their ties. Historically, America's relationship with Turkey has rested on defense cooperation. Thus, even though the U.S. sale of F-35s is a complicated proposition in the short term, it could ultimately help restore the fabric of the bilateral relationship under Trump. In exchange, the U.S. administration can rely on Turkey in global matters from the Middle East to Eurasia and potentially Africa.
- **Leverage Turkey's unique status as a swing state.** Under Erdogan since 2003, Turkey has evolved into a swing state in global politics. It is now the only such state to be simultaneously a middle power, a NATO member, and increasingly a global player. U.S. policy should acknowledge Turkey's strengths, help Ankara address deficits where it serves American interests, and seek opportunities to work with Turkey in great power competition against Russia and China.
- **Work with Turkey to end the wars in Syria and Ukraine, and keep Iran from meddling in the region.** Leaning on Erdogan can help Trump achieve U.S. goals not only in the major war theaters, but also in the key task of checking Iran's regional power. This will mean making sure Tehran does not reestablish a foothold in Syria and curbing its power in places like Iraq. ❖

## NOTES

1. Willem Marx, “The State Department Allows the Sale of F-16 Jets to Turkey to Move Forward,” National Public Radio, January 27, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/27/1227418505/f-16s-turkey-sweden-nato-kurds-greece>.
2. Ezgi Akin, “Turkey’s Erdogan Praises Trump’s ‘Bravery’ in Call with Former President,” Al-Monitor, July 18, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/07/turkeys-erdogan-praises-trumps-bravery-call-for-mer-president>.
3. Aaron Mehta, “Turkey Officially Kicked Out of F-35 Program, Costing U.S. Half a Billion Dollars,” *Defense News*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2019/07/17/turkey-officially-kicked-out-of-f-35-program/>.
4. Amanda Macias, “U.S. Sanctions Turkey over Purchase of Russian S-400 Missile System,” CNBC, updated December 15, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/14/us-sanctions-turkey-over-russian-s400.html>.
5. Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, “Chaos in Syria, Washington After Trump Call with Erdogan Unleashed Turkish Military,” NBC News, October 7, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/chaos-syria-washington-after-trump-call-erdogan-unleashed-turkish-military-n1063516>.
6. Nicole Gaouette, “As Trump Threatens to Destroy Turkey’s Economy and Kurds Die, Many Wonder if Penalties Will Have Teeth,” CNN, updated October 14, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/14/politics/trump-turkey-sanctions-skepticism/index.html>.
7. Michael R. Pompeo, “The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231,” press release, U.S. Department of State, December 14, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caat-sa-231/>.
8. “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020,” December 20, 2019, Public Law 116-92, <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ92/PLAW-116publ92.pdf>.
9. Soner Cagaptay, “How Turkey Moved East,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-turkey-moved-east>.
10. Eric Schmitt, Maggie Haberman, and Edward Wong, “President Endorses Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Shifting U.S. Policy,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/politics/trump-turkey-syria.html>.
11. Devorah Margolin, “U.S. Returnees from Syria Reveal Much About the Repatriation Challenge,” PolicyWatch 3867, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 10, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-returnees-syria-reveal-much-about-repatriation-challenge>.
12. Andrew Tabler, “Countering Iran in East Syria Means Moderating the SDF,” PolicyWatch 3915, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 17, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-iran-east-syria-means-moderating-sdf>.
13. Mehmet Alaca and Haydar Karaalp, “Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project: Enhancing Regional Connectivity, Trade,” Anadolu Agency, September 16, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-iraq-development-road-project-enhancing-regional-connectivity-trade/2993555>.
14. Michael Knights, “A Draw Is a Win: The Houthis After One Year of War,” *CTC Sentinel*, October 2024, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/draw-win-houthis-after-one-year-war>.
15. The six western Balkan states are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.
16. Paul Iddon, “From Baykar to Kyiv: Turkey’s ‘No Strings Attached’ Drone Policy,” *Forbes*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/04/13/turkeys-no-strings-attached-drone-export-policy/>.
17. Reuters, “Turkey Halts All Trade with Israel, Cites Worsening Palestinian Situation,” May 2, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-turkeys-erdogan-is-breaking-agreements-by-bloc-king-ports-trade-2024-05-02/>.

## The Author



SONER CAGAPTAY is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. He has written extensively on U.S.-Turkey relations, Turkish domestic politics, and Turkish nationalism. His books include *A Sultan in Autumn: Erdogan Faces Turkey's Uncontainable Forces* (2021).



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY  
1111 19TH STREET NW | WASHINGTON, DC 20036  
[WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG](http://WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG)  
©2025 THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY.  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.