

TURKEY

GÖNÜL TOL

ISSUES

- The armed conflict between Turkey and its Kurds resumed in 2015, leading to thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced in a few years. Kurdish cities have been destroyed and elected Kurdish officials, including mayors and members of parliament, have been removed from office or sent to jail on bogus terrorism charges. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's nationalist ally Devlet Bahçeli has been calling for the closure of the pro-Kurdish party.
- Turkey has become increasingly authoritarian under President Erdoğan. He has hollowed out democratic institutions in an authoritarian power grab, human rights violations are widespread, the government crackdown on dissenters has intensified, the judiciary has become politicized, and the rule of law has been systematically dismantled.
- There are around 4 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. The nationalist backlash against the Syrians has increased recently due to the country's growing economic problems.
- Turkey has cultivated close relations with Russia in the last few years. It is already dependent on Russia for energy and trade, and it has to work with Moscow in Syria. It has deepened defense ties as well. It purchased the Russian S-400 missile defense system and recently tested the system. Erdoğan said Turkey would hold talks with Russia about purchasing a second S-400 missile battery and has expressed interest in buying Russian stealth fighter jets.
- In October 2020, Erdoğan threatened a new military operation against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey-backed groups shelled Ayn Issa and other small villages in northeastern Syria in a sign that Turkey might be planning a military operation to capture Ayn Issa from the Kurds.
- Turkey militarily intervened in the Libyan war in support of the Tripoli government. Turkey has several thousand military

personnel as well as two permanent bases in the country and transferred thousands of Syrian opposition fighters there.

- Turkey is at loggerheads with Greece and Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean over several issues including the divided island of Cyprus, energy drilling rights, and maritime boundaries. Turkey has legitimate concerns in the region, but its use of gunboat diplomacy increased tensions, raising the specter of confrontation between NATO allies. Several countries including France and the UAE have thrown their military support behind Greece and Cyprus, while Turkey's signing of a maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli government overlapping with the area Greece considers part of its continental shelf made the situation worse.

US INTERESTS

- Turkey's failure to find a peaceful solution to its decades-old "Kurdish problem" is causing problems for Turkey-U.S. ties as well as U.S. policy in Syria due to America's ongoing cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a terrorist organization, in the fight against ISIS.
- Another Turkish military incursion against the SDF would jeopardize the U.S.-brokered cease-fire with the group, which has already been violated many times, and would threaten the gains made in the campaign against ISIS and lead to further instability and bloodshed in the region.
- Increasing authoritarianism in Turkey leads to a more ideology-driven foreign policy. Turkey has been pursuing an Islamist and nationalist Middle East policy since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, which has undermined U.S. goals in the region and driven Turkey away from the Western alliance.
- Turkey's military intervention in Libya has not only complicated the war there but also increased tensions in the eastern Mediterranean. The prospects of a long-term Turkish military

presence in the country have led to other outside actors, including Russia, France, Egypt, and the UAE, doubling down on their involvement in the conflict in support of the eastern forces led by Khalifa Hifter. Turkey's military presence threatens the U.N.-led political discussions in the country and its maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli-based government has also raised tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies in the Mediterranean.

- Turkey is a NATO country. Its close defense ties with Russia and hard power tactics in the eastern Mediterranean weaken the NATO alliance and endanger Turkey's participation in future operations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Erdoğan's foreign policy actions are mostly driven by his domestic calculations, making a U-turn in foreign policy due to outside pressure difficult. Both sides must accept the transactional nature of the relationship. The U.S. must set clear redlines and communicate to the Turkish side the consequences if Ankara crosses them.
- Push Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to the negotiating table no matter how improbable a peace process seems given Erdoğan's alliance with the nationalists. Encourage third parties such as Norway to mediate.
- Continue to speak publicly and privately at senior U.S. government levels about concerns with the decline of freedom of expression and association in Turkey, call out human rights violations, provide more support for local organizations working on democracy and human rights issues, and increase overall assistance for civil society and outside NGOs working in areas like women's rights, youth empowerment, economic development, combatting corruption, and inclusion of minorities in the national discourse.
- Expand support for programs that are designed to improve Syrian refugees' livelihood opportunities, including programs that increase women's participation in the workforce. Also increase resettlement places for refugees from Turkey.
- Outline the consequences of another military incursion into northeastern Syria clearly.
- Communicate to Ankara clearly that the U.S. administration will impose harsher sanctions that would have a significant impact on the country's military readiness if Ankara buys further Russian systems. If Turkey agrees not to operationalize the S-400s or buy additional Russian systems, Turkey can be reintroduced into the F-35 program.
- Turkey has legitimate concerns in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean. The U.S. should play the honest mediator between the parties and work to create further mechanisms to avoid military escalation and build the coherence of NATO. Offering Turkey a seat at the table in the East Med Gas Forum, launched by several Mediterranean allies of the U.S., could set a positive agenda for further talks between parties.
- The U.S. should continue to call on Turkey to halt its military intervention in Libya.