



# NO ONE LOST TURKEY: ERDOGAN'S FOREIGN POLICY QUEST FOR AGENCY WITH RUSSIA AND BEYOND

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## In this featured roundtable essay for Vol. 2, Iss. 4, Lisel Hintz discusses the future of Turkey's foreign policy and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's vision for a "New Turkey."

A recent and impressively comprehensive assessment of the challenges in U.S.-Turkish relations asked the question: "Who Lost Turkey?"<sup>1</sup> That question has been posed many times by various news outlets and think tanks over the past several years, going back as far as 2006, when the European Union froze accession talks with Turkey.<sup>2</sup> More recent concerns about Turkey drifting toward Russia and Iran are prompting U.S. analysts to reassess the reliability of a country that was meant to be both buffer against and bridge to a difficult set of neighbors. The October 22 agreement signed following talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sochi regarding joint Turkish-Russian efforts to expel Syrian forces from a safe zone originally negotiated with the United States seems to provide further evidence that Turkey's cooperation with Russia is undercutting, if not contravening, U.S. interests in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> While many American citizens no doubt support President Trump's (badly bungled) decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria – although many seem positioned to move to Iraq rather than coming home – the Sochi deal gives Russia considerable leverage in determining the outcome of Syria's civil war.<sup>4</sup>

To understand how we got to the point where some are proclaiming the United States has "lost" Turkey to Russia and other non-Western allies, we need to take a step back. Following Turkey's decision to complete its purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia in July,<sup>5</sup> observers employed a range of apocalyptic terms to capture what they foresaw as the impending rupture in ties between NATO allies Turkey and

the United States. Hardliners at Washington, D.C., think tank talks I attended in June warned of a "rough summer ahead," arguing that while Turkey is a valuable ally it is not an irreplaceable one. Others pragmatically cautioned that Turkey was too big to fail, and reminded those concerned about losing access to Incirlik airbase that America had sanctioned Turkey in the past over Cyprus without substantial fallout.

In fact, the summer of 2019 proved to be much less tumultuous for U.S.-Turkish relations than decision-makers and analysts in Washington predicted. As President Donald Trump stalled on imposing sanctions on Turkey through the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, relying instead on his ability to negotiate with fellow populist strongman Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, attention became focused on the progress being made in negotiations between the two countries over Syria.<sup>6</sup> Despite repeated threats to launch a unilateral military offensive if the United States did not adhere to agreed conditions on the establishment and patrol of the security mechanism on Syria's northern border east of the Euphrates, as well as Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar's obliquely menacing references to plans B and C,<sup>7</sup> the agreement on what was known as the "safe zone" seemed to be holding. Moreover, America had committed to address Turkey's very real security concerns about the presence of the Kurdish People's Protection Units forces on its southern border. The group, which the United States supported as part of the larger Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against the Islamic State, has organic links to Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party, which both

1 Keith Johnson and Robbie Gramer, "Who Lost Turkey?" *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/19/who-lost-turkey-middle-east-s-400-missile-deal-russia-syria-iraq-kurdish-united-states-nato-alliance-partners-allies-adversaries/>.

2 Owen Matthews, "Who Lost Turkey," *Newsweek*, Dec. 10, 2006, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-lost-turkey-105633>.

3 Kareen Fahim and Sarah Dadouch, "Russia, Turkey Agree to Jointly Remove Kurdish Fighter's Along Turkey's Border in Northern Syria," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/turkeys-erdogan-meets-with-putin-in-russia-to-discuss-syrian-operation/2019/10/22/764abcea-f43f-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkeys-erdogan-meets-with-putin-in-russia-to-discuss-syrian-operation/2019/10/22/764abcea-f43f-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb_story.html).

4 Sune Engel Rasmussen and Isabel Coles, "U.S. Troops Withdrawing from Syria Draw Scorn," *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-troops-cross-into-iraq-as-they-withdraw-from-syria-11571649101>.

5 "US sets Turkey deadline to give up Russian missile deal," *Deutsche Welle*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-sets-turkey-deadline-to-give-up-russian-missile-deal/a-49108079>.

6 Metin Gürcan, "Cryptic Safe-Zone Deal between Turkey, US," *Al Monitor*, Aug. 13, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/turkey-united-states-syria-safe-zone-deal-divided-public.html>.

7 "Turkey Has Plan B if US Fails to Keep Promises for Syria Safe Zone: Defense Minister," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Sept. 3, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-has-plan-b-if-us-fails-to-keep-promises-for-syria-safe-zone-defense-minister-146257>.

Turkey and the United States consider a terrorist organization. This tenuous arrangement forestalled any previously imminent attack on a U.S. ally (i.e., the People's Protection Units) by a U.S. ally (i.e., Turkey). That is, until October 9.

The implosion of the agreement was as bewildering as it was fraught with serious implications for U.S.-Turkish relations. A sudden declaration via a White House statement on October 6 that Turkey would be moving into northern Syria and that U.S. forces “would not support or be involved in the operation”<sup>8</sup> followed a phone call between presidents Trump and Erdogan in which one leader apparently convinced the other that Turkish forces could handle the problem of remaining Islamic State fighters and that the United States' work in Syria was done. The question of who was doing the convincing and whether one or both were attempting to bluff remains unclear,<sup>9</sup> but the dynamic recalls a similar exchange and declaration of U.S. troop withdrawal in December 2018 that led Secretary of Defense James Mattis to resign.<sup>10</sup>

The sudden policy shift — including the abandonment of U.S.-allied Kurdish forces and a lack of planning for the detained Islamic State fighters that the People's Protection Units had been guarding — happened immediately during the October 6 call. Taking advantage of this shift, Turkey launched its incongruously named “Fountain of Peace” operation in northern Syria three days later. In addressing the now-abandoned allies that had done the majority of the fighting against the Islamic State at the United States' behest, Trump waffled in his position toward what he referred to as “the Kurds” — a homogenizing objectification that does damage to the many national, linguistic, political, and other differences among Kurds. A stream of Trump's tweets in the 24 hours following the incursion variously stated that the Kurds were Turkey's “natural enemies,” but also “special people and wonderful fighters.” Similarly perplexing, he reminded his followers that the United States was still helping the Kurds “financially/[with] weapons!” but then erroneously

suggested they betrayed U.S. forces in World War II because they “didn't help us with Normandy.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the United Nations warned that Turkey may be responsible for war crimes against Kurdish civilians committed by its jihadist militia allies loosely organized under the new Syrian National Army.<sup>12</sup> As for U.S.-Turkish relations, although Trump appeared to give Erdogan a green light for the incursion by saying the United States would not get involved, the U.S. president, facing immense domestic blowback, later declared in another series of surreal tweets that, in his “great and unmatched wisdom,” he could “totally destroy and obliterate” the Turkish economy if Turkey crossed some as-yet-undefined line.<sup>13</sup>

From the U.S. perspective, policymaking on Turkey has been, in a word, chaotic. It thus might seem to make sense to pose the question, “Who lost Turkey?” and place the blame on some aspect of the U.S. foreign policy-making establishment. Yet, it is worth examining the underlying attitudes that prompted this much-discussed question, as “Who lost X?” is a relatively common trope employed by U.S. foreign policy critics. Important to recognize, however, is that this form of analysis is based on the disturbing assumption that X was someone's to lose in the first place. The question reveals a pervasive belief that X is simply a passive object — whether referring to Iran, Pakistan, Hungary, or another former ally. This logic implies that, had America just done something differently, Turkey, in this case, would have remained quiescently within the fold. This denial of Turkey's agency is pure hubris.

## Recognizing Turkish Agency

What U.S. foreign policymakers continually refuse to recognize is that the maintenance of partnerships and alliances is a two-way street. Any reasonably informed discussion of Turkey's turn away from the European Union, for example, must include the major missteps made by Europe, such as the decision to allow Cyprus to gain E.U.

8 Statement from the White House Press Secretary, Oct. 6, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/>.

9 Jonathan Swan “Behind the Scenes of the Trump Bluff That Kicked Off Turkey's Invasion,” *Axios*, Oct. 13, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-invasion-bluff-fc761d8f-e33b-473b-8ece-d0b8b3a51f26.html>.

10 Jack Detsch, “Mattis Exits over Mideast Policy Split with Trump,” *Al Monitor*, Dec. 21, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/mattis-exit-trump-mideast-policy-split-syria.html>.

11 Aaron Blake, “They Didn't Help Us with Normandy: Trump Abandons the Kurds – Rhetorically If Not Literally,” *The Washington Post*, 9 October 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/09/trump-has-abandoned-kurds-least-rhetorically/>.

12 Ayla Jean Yackley, “Erdogan Defies International Outcry over Syrian Incursion,” *Al Monitor*, 15 October 2019: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/erdogan-defies-international-outcry-syria-incursion.html>.

13 Felicia Sonmez, “Trump Hails His Own ‘Great and Unmatched Wisdom’ in Warning to Turkey,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 7, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-hails-his-own-great-and-unmatched-wisdom-in-warning-to-turkey/2019/10/07/13c65990-e935-11e9-9306-47cb0324fd44\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-hails-his-own-great-and-unmatched-wisdom-in-warning-to-turkey/2019/10/07/13c65990-e935-11e9-9306-47cb0324fd44_story.html).

membership as a partitioned state,<sup>14</sup> and the use of highly discriminatory language by top E.U. officials. As for Turkey, the regime and society look much different today than they did when Ankara lobbied so fervently to join NATO after initially being denied membership along with Greece in 1950. In its formative decades, Turkey by no means had a starry-eyed, pro-Western orientation. Founding father and first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk used weapons from Russia in his fight against Allied occupation in Turkey's War of Liberation. Later, Atatürk viewed entrenchment in transatlantic relationships as the surest way to protect Turkey's hard-won borders and affirm its natural, if warily defensive, place in the West.

Today's Turkey, under the consolidated rule of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, does not share the same belief in Western identity and Western values as the United States does. Arguably, it does not even share the same interests. Erdogan's vision for a "New Turkey,"<sup>15</sup> as he calls it, depicts a country that has thrown off the shackles of its previous power asymmetries and is no longer beholden to the West. In line with what my recent book terms an "Ottoman Islamist" understanding of Turkish national identity,<sup>16</sup> Turkey's foreign policy under the 17-year-rule of Erdogan's party has sought not only to take advantage of religious and cultural ties with neighbors in the Middle East and the Balkans, as prescribed by now-sidelined Justice and Development Party foreign policy guru Ahmet Davutoğlu,<sup>17</sup> but to reclaim its role as the leading (Sunni) Muslim power in the region. This activist, and even aggressive, foreign policy contrasts sharply with the previously dominant "Republican Nationalist" vision for the country, which saw Turkey's natural and most secure place as being in the West, but remained wary of foreign entanglements that could jeopardize

its territorial integrity. Justice and Development Party-led initiatives meant to establish Turkey's legitimacy in its new activist role include attempts to resolve the international community's concerns over a nuclear Iran by brokering a deal, to support a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, and to first moderate and later oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>18</sup>

Notably, each of those initiatives failed. Erdogan's estimation of his ability to use culturally-based soft power to bolster Turkey's leadership in regional politics appear as miscalculated as his formula for low inflation through low interest rates.<sup>19</sup> Just as new Turkic states such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were skeptical of a Turkish "big brother" intervening in their affairs following decades of Soviet control,<sup>20</sup> states occupying former Ottoman territory reject the notion that Istanbul's legacy as home of the sultanate and caliphate endows Ankara with any special influence.

Where the Justice and Development Party government has been more successful is in being confrontational, not negotiating and mediating. Erdogan became, even if only briefly, a hero of the Arab street when he walked off the World Economic Forum stage after lambasting Israeli President Shimon Peres for Israel's attacks on Gaza.<sup>21</sup> Equally fiery and at times anti-Semitic rhetoric following a deadly Israeli Defense Forces raid on a Turkish flotilla attempting to break the Gaza blockade generated nationalist support at home as well as Muslim solidarity abroad.<sup>22</sup> Accusing others of the same kind of divisive identity politics in which he himself engages has also served Erdogan well. Shaming Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for stirring up sectarian tensions won him temporary favor among Sunni Arab leaders.<sup>23</sup> Standing up to some of those same leaders by asserting that

14 Doğa Ulaş Eralp and Nimet Beriker, "Assessing the Conflict Resolution Potential of the EU: The Cyprus Conflict and Accession Negotiations," *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2005.

15 Umut Uras, "Erdogan Promises a 'New Turkey,'" *Al Jazeera*, July 12, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/erdogan-promises-new-turkey-20147127316609347.html>.

16 Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

17 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).

18 Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out*, 111-18.

19 Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008; Onur Ant, "Behind Erdogan's Strange Ideas about Interest Rates," *Bloomberg.com*, Aug. 2, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-02/behind-erdogan-s-strange-ideas-about-interest-rates-quicktake>.

20 Bayram Balcı and Thomas Liles "What Remains from Turkish Soft Power in the Caucasus," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Apr. 24, 2019, <http://turkishpolicy.com/blog/31/what-remains-from-turkish-soft-power-in-the-caucasus>.

21 Jamal Dajani, "Arabs Find a Hero," *Huffington Post*, Feb. 3, 2009, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arabs-find-a-hero\\_b\\_162497](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arabs-find-a-hero_b_162497).

22 Raphael Ahren, "Turkish MP: Erdogan's Anti-Semitism Is Hard to Reverse," *Times of Israel*, Feb. 5, 2014, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arabs-find-a-hero\\_b\\_162497](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arabs-find-a-hero_b_162497).

23 Fehim Taştekin, "Turkey's Sunni Identity Test," *Al Monitor*, June 21, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/turkey-sunnism-sectarian-rhetoric.html>.

the Gulf Cooperation Council's blockade of Qatar violated Islamic values and stepping in with aid earned Erdogan much-needed Qatari support from Turkey's one remaining close ally as the lira plunged last summer.<sup>24</sup>

The confrontational reputation Erdogan has cultivated through these interactions helps him communicate to domestic audiences a narrative that nefarious foreign elements are attempting to thwart Turkey's rise. For his supporters, "New Turkey" is independent and should take orders from no one, especially not its former patrons in the West. From this perspective, when supposedly refused the option to purchase a Patriot missile system from the United States that included technology transfer and co-production provisions,<sup>25</sup> why shouldn't Turkey purchase an S-400 system from the Russians? When the United States cooperates militarily with a group the Turkish government defines as a terrorist organization threatening its national security,<sup>26</sup> why shouldn't it take steps to defend itself? Why should Turkey agree to adhere to fresh, unilateral sanctions against Iran because the United States says it should? Answers abound as to why Turkey should understand U.S. frustrations, including the S-400's NATO-incompatible and intelligence-compromising technology,<sup>27</sup> Turkey's initial hesitation in fighting the Islamic State,<sup>28</sup> and an unprecedented oil-for-gold sanctions-busting scheme implicating Turkish officials at the highest level.<sup>29</sup> But these do not fit neatly into a story in which the West does its best but cannot succeed in cowing a powerful and independent New Turkey into submission.

## Evaluating Turkey's "Russia Turn"

This is not to say that Turkey, or even Erdogan, does not still need the West. As persuasively as some analysts have argued that Turkey's behavior augurs a precarious warming of relations with Russia,<sup>30</sup> NATO membership remains the best form of defense against Moscow's aggression in the region and is a collective security guarantee decision-makers in Ankara will likely be unwilling to sacrifice — even as they repeatedly test the boundaries of that membership.<sup>31</sup> Turkey's relationship with Russia today hinges upon the economic, energy, and security interests the latter can help the former meet, but Moscow expects to get something in return. Thus, far from any notion of partnership, bilateral ties between the two countries might best be characterized as a distinctly asymmetrical form of transactionalism. That is, each country gains something out of the relationship but Moscow stands to benefit much more. As much as Turkey needed Russia's acquiescence, at the very least, for its forays into Syria, the Soviet aspirations of greater control in the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) that motivated Turkey to seek security in the NATO alliance in the first place loom just as powerfully in modern Russia. From an identity perspective, thinking of Turkey's geostrategic position in Ottoman Islamist terms, Turkish decision-makers would be remiss in not recalling the number of wars lost to the Russians between the 16th and 20th centuries, the amount of territory lost, and the lives of millions of Turkic Muslims who were deported or massacred as a result of Russian campaigns.<sup>32</sup>

24 Ercan Gürses and Aziz el Yaakoubi, "Turkish President Says Qatar Isolation Violates Islamic Values," *Reuters.com*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar/turkish-president-says-qatar-isolation-violates-islamic-values-idUSKBN1931YW>; Onur Ant and Asli Kandemir, "Qatar Comes to Rescue as Turkey Moves to Avert Financial Crisis," *Bloomberg.com*, Aug. 15, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-15/qatar-comes-to-rescue-as-turkey-moves-to-avert-financial-crisis>.

25 Dorian Jones, "Allure of Domestic Arms Drives Turkey toward Russian Missiles," *VOANews.com*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/allure-domestic-arms-drives-turkey-toward-russian-missiles>.

26 Anne Barnard and Ben Hubbard, "Allies or Terrorists: Who Are the Kurdish Fighters in Syria?" *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-syria.html>; "Turkey Says U.S. Support for YPG Kurds Was a 'Big Mistake,'" *Reuters.com*, Nov. 18, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-usa/turkey-says-u-s-support-for-syrian-kurdish-ypg-a-big-mistake-idUSKCN1NN09I>.

27 "US to Turkey: S-400s Aren't Compatible with NATO Tech," *Military.com*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.military.com/defensetech/2017/07/17/us-to-turkey-russian-s-400s-arent-compatible-with-nato-tech>.

28 Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "In Turkey, a Late Crackdown on Islamist Fighters," *Washington Post*, Aug. 12, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ae3fc1714c4b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ae3fc1714c4b_story.html).

29 Benjamin Weiser, "Erdogan Helped Turks Evade Iran Sanctions, Reza Zarrab Says," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-iran-sanctions.html>.

30 See, for example, Aaron Stein, "Ankara's Look East: How Turkey's Warming Ties with Russia Threaten Its Place in the Transatlantic Community," *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/ankaras-look-east-how-turkeys-warming-ties-with-russia-threaten-its-place-in-the-transatlantic-community/>.

31 Oya Dursun-Özkanca, "Turkish Soft Balancing against the EU? An Analysis of the Prospects for Improved Transatlantic Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2017.

32 See, for example, Suat Kiniklioğlu and Valeriy Morkva, "An Anatomy of Turkish–Russian Relations," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2007.

Indeed, it was precisely the memory of these conflicts — or, perhaps more accurately, the memory of them among Turkish voters — that has spurred Erdogan's open criticism of Russia. While selective in his rhetorical critique — likely also a function of voter preferences, specifically among ethnic or “Pan-Turkic Nationalist” voters whose support Erdogan has counted on to achieve the majority his presidency requires<sup>33</sup> — when he takes on Russia for its abuses against ethnically Turkic Crimean Tatars, for example, he is forceful. The Turkish president repeatedly criticized Moscow's actions in Crimea as an “illegal annexation” of the peninsula,<sup>34</sup> stating in November 2018 that “we do not and will not recognize” Russian sovereignty over the territory.<sup>35</sup>

### Assessing Turkey's Position

Remarkably, all of this criticism has come after a so-called rapprochement between the two countries in 2016 — one which notably followed the deft use of sanctions by Russia to squeeze Turkey's economy through bans on Turkish imports, tourism packages, and construction projects, while also suspending work on the TurkStream pipeline.<sup>36</sup> The sanctions came as swift and severe punishment after the downing of a Russian warplane by two Turkish F-16s in November 2015.<sup>37</sup> Feeling the bite of economic pressure, Erdogan demonstrated his renowned pragmatic capacity to execute sudden 180-degree shifts in foreign policy when necessary, while at the same time spinning the account of what happened in his favor. Erdogan's June 2016 letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin expressing his personal condolences for the death of the Russian pilot was sent shortly before a coup attempt that the Turkish government blames on its ally-turned-foe, the Gülen movement.

In the same way that the July 2016 coup attempt

provided the justification for firing and arresting over 100,000 individuals supposedly linked to the movement,<sup>38</sup> it also allowed Turkey to blame a member of the Gülen movement for the rift in Russia-Turkey relations. Just a few days after the failed putsch, two officers with alleged links to the Gülen movement were detained in connection with the downing of the jet, and Ankara's mayor, Melih Gökçek, a member of the Justice and Development

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Party, declared the incident part of a plot to disrupt Russia-Turkey relations.<sup>39</sup> Putin himself gave credence to this explanation,<sup>40</sup> which removed any reason for hard feelings among the two countries' leaders. Remarkably, this reduction in tension even survived the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey while at an art exhibition in Ankara. Again, the assassin was accused of being a

33 Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out*, 37-41.

34 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Kırım'ın Yasa Dışı İlhakını Tanımadık Tanımayacağız," *Akşam Gazetesi*, Oct. 9, 2017, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ukraynada-konusuyor/haber-667769>.

35 "Erdogan: Kırım'ın Yasa Dışı İlhakını Tanımayacağımızı Tekraren Vurguladık," *Yeni Asya Gazetesi*, Nov. 3, 2018, [http://www.yeniasya.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-kirim-in-yasa-disi-ilhakini-tanimayacagimizi-tekraren-vurguladik\\_477328](http://www.yeniasya.com.tr/gundem/erdogan-kirim-in-yasa-disi-ilhakini-tanimayacagimizi-tekraren-vurguladik_477328).

36 Selin Girit, "Turkey Faces Big Losses as Russian Sanctions Bite," *BBC News*, Jan. 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>.

37 Mehmet Çetingüleş, "Will Russia's Economic Restrictions on Turkey Backfire?" *Al Monitor*, Dec. 13, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2015/12/turkey-russia-steep-costs-of-downing-of-russian-jet.html>.

38 Lisel Hintz, "Turkey's Post-Putsch-Purge," *The Boston Globe*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2016/07/28/turkey-post-putsch-purge/F0jXxjTkNvuMKQVYqN7BuJ/story.html>.

39 "Turkish Pilots Who Downed Russian Jet Detained," *Al-Jazeera*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/turkish-pilots-downed-russian-jet-detained-160719132950496.html>.

40 "Ex-Turkish PM: I Was Told Pilot Who Shot Down Russian Jet Was Not Linked to Gülen Network," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Jan. 12, 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ex-turkish-pm-i-was-told-pilot-who-shot-down-russian-jet-was-not-linked-to-gulen-network-108436>.

member of the Gülen movement, as well as having jihadist links.<sup>41</sup>

This serves as a reminder that Turkey's bilateral relationships can, at times, be quite volatile, and are often infused with rhetoric that casts Turkey as the victor. Another example is Turkey's supposed rapprochement with Israel following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's apology for the Mavi Marmara deaths: Pro-government media outlets emphasized the concessions Israel would be forced to make, including making financial reparations and allowing Turkey to provide humanitarian aid to Gaza. A *Yeni Şafak* headline expressed this view well: "Israel's Press: We Surrendered, Hamas and Turkey Won."<sup>42</sup> Two other journalists posed the question of whether Turkey's negotiated achievement should be deemed a "victory" (*zafer*) or a "thrashing" (*hezimet*).<sup>43</sup>

European leaders' experiences dealing with Erdogan can also be instructive to U.S. foreign policymakers attempting to identify trends in the Turkish ruler's behavior in the international arena. E.U. heads of state are cautious about assuming that steps such as Turkey's normalization of relations with the Netherlands and its release of Greek soldiers<sup>44</sup> — taken at a time of heightened tensions with the United States and Turkey's own economic crisis — constitute any substantive or lasting form of rapprochement. A more cooperative Turkey is certainly desirable, particularly for German Chancellor Angela Merkel and others concerned about a potential influx of Syrian refugees from Idlib, but cannot be assured. Indeed, Erdogan has threatened in the past to open Turkey's borders when he did not receive the concessions he believed were due to him.<sup>45</sup> The Dutch and Germans, whom Erdogan has called fascists and Nazis,<sup>46</sup> would also

do well to remember his less than conciliatory stance during so-called reconciliation with Israel discussed above.<sup>47</sup>

These examples help to demonstrate Turkey's tendency to shift its stance and recalibrate its relationships under Erdogan's leadership. Thus, not despite but because of its Ottoman Islamist vision, Erdogan's "New Turkey" is built on the premise that it is beholden to no one and need not choose between the West or the East. The lesson for the United States is that what U.S. policymakers view as reasonable expectations — don't attack U.S. Kurdish allies in the fight against the Islamic State — is viewed by Turkey as hypocritical imperialist demands — leave this particular terrorist group alone because its fighting presence reduced the need for U.S. boots on the ground. Expecting Turkey to fall in line will only continue to disappoint Washington.

## The Effects of Sanctions

Furthermore, despite the efficacy of sanctions in the Russian case, the U.S. threat of sanctions may actually help Erdogan garner domestic support.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, he can channel his citizens' frustrations with what they perceive as the United States throwing its weight around by standing up to a would-be bully with a defiant "*ey Amerika!*" ("Now see here, America!")<sup>49</sup> The wide-ranging spectrum of anti-American protests in which Turkish citizens engaged after the United States imposed sanctions against Turkey in August 2018, for example, was impressive. From smashed iPhones to canceled cowboy Westerns to a man named Ferhat Dolar applying to change his now much-maligned last

41 "Erdogan Resmen Açıkladı: Suikastçı FETÖ Mensubu," *Milliyet Haber*, Dec. 21, 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdogan-resmen-acikladi-suikastci-feto-mensubu-2365707>.

42 "İsrail Basını: Teslim Olduk, Hamas ve Türkiye Kazandı," *Yeni Şafak Gazetesi*, June 27, 2016, <http://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/israil-basini-teslim-olduk-hamas-ve-turkiye-kazandi-2487428>.

43 Yasin Altıntaş and Berrin Naz Önsiper, "Türkiye-İsrail Anlaşması: Zafer mi Hezimet mi?" *Tesnim Haber Ajansı*, Aug. 22, 2016, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/tr/news/2016/08/22/1164807/t%C3%BCrkiye-israil-anla%C5%9Fmas%C4%B1-zafer-mi-hezimet-mi>.

44 "Turkey, Netherlands Agree to Normalize Ties," *Reuters.com*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-netherlands/turkey-netherlands-agree-to-normalize-ties-idUSKBN1KA1L0>; "Turkey Releases Two Greek Soldiers," *Hürriyet Daily News*, Aug. 14, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-court-releases-two-greek-soldiers-135803>.

45 Lisel Hintz and Caroline Feehan, "Burden or Boon? Erdogan's Tactical Treatment of the Syrian Refugee Crisis," *Middle East Institute*, Jan. 10, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/burden-or-boon-turkeys-tactical-treatment-syrian-refugee-crisis>.

46 Turkey's Erdogan Calls Dutch Authorities 'Nazi' Remnants," *BBC News*, Mar. 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39242707>.

47 Shashank Joshi and Aaron Stein, "The Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement," *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 3, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/03/the-turkey-israel-rapprochement/>.

48 Lisel Hintz and Blaise Misztal, "Hitting Erdogan Where It Hurts, Not Where It Helps," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 3, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/hitting-erdogan-where-it-hurts-not-where-it-helps/>.

49 "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Ey Amerika, Ey Trump Sen Bunları Görmedin mi Ondan Sonra 'Dünyanın En Güçlü' Haberler.com, Dec. 17, 2017, <https://www.haberler.com/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ey-amerika-ey-trump-sen-10358274-haberi/>.

name,<sup>50</sup> those who blame U.S. meddling for Turkey's currency crisis found a variety of non-traditional outlets for venting their frustration.

Of course that frustration did not appear in a vacuum. Erdogan, whose multiple speeches per day are broadcast live on nearly every Turkish television station, was the one who called for a boycott on U.S. products, including electronic goods. As part of a broader "rally 'round the flag" strategy of stoking nationalist pride and placing responsibility for his country's intensifying economic woes on anyone but himself, Erdogan has declared repeatedly that Turkey will defy all foreign attempts to bring its people "to their knees."<sup>51</sup> While not specifying exactly whom he blames other than "them," Erdogan casts the United States in the role of saboteur seeking to halt Turkey's rise through "economic war."<sup>52</sup>

By tweeting that he was doubling tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum imports at the exact moment Turkish Treasury and Finance Minister (and Erdogan's son-in-law) Berat Albayrak was trying to assert control over the economy last summer,<sup>53</sup> Trump unwittingly stepped neatly into the role the Turkish president scripted for him. Erdogan and his various media mouthpieces have been conspiratorially accusing the West of scheming to disrupt the Turkish president's consolidation of executive and personal power for the past five years — in the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the 2016 coup attempt, for example. The fact that Trump helped prove Erdogan right in the case of the lira crisis only bolsters pre-existing anti-American sentiment that has served to shore up pro-government support and legitimize a foreign policy re-orientation. Tensions between Washington and Ankara have not pushed the latter to turn elsewhere, but they provide a nice justification for doing so.

Trump's tempestuous tweets aside, the sanctions whose direct and indirect effects on the Turkish people U.S. policy-makers are willing to stomach are unlikely to produce the desired movement on any of the issues mentioned. First, as sanctions

expert Richard Haass argues, in order to increase the likelihood that sanctions will compel or deter particular actions, they should adhere to several general criteria.<sup>54</sup> These include multilateral participation, narrow and tough targeting of the individual(s) responsible, clear standards for compliance, and relatively low stakes issue for target state. None of the coercive steps the United States has implemented as it continues to weigh its options regarding the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act meet any of these criteria fully, much less all of them. The decision to sanction two of Turkey's defense and energy ministries and freeze the assets of three ministers in the wake of Turkey's October operation in Syria appears relatively toothless, given that Erdogan's invitation to the White House still stands as of this writing.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Vice President Mike Pence's trip to Ankara along with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and special envoy on Syria and the Islamic State James Jeffrey produced an outcome favorable to Turkey in which the United States agreed to lift the minor sanctions that had been imposed. The deal achieved there, including a temporary halt to the conflict to allow Kurdish troops to withdraw from a region in northern Syria specifically designated by Ankara, seemed distinctly more of a "gift" to Erdogan than a punishment.<sup>56</sup> In brief, Turkey received much of what it initially wanted in Syria without having to wage a protracted war that could risk waning domestic support were Turkish troop and civilian casualties to rise.

The problem of Washington's unclear and inconsistent messaging through various channels and delegations is arguably the biggest obstacle — other than Turkish recalcitrance — to successfully deterring Turkey through credible threats. Namely, Trump actively undermines his own bureaucratic organizations' efforts to convince Turkey that the threat of penalty will be forthcoming and unsustainably severe. Before threatening to inflict obliterating punishment on the Turkish economy, Trump repeatedly bragged

50 "ABD'ye Tepki için Soyadını Değiştirmek İstiyor," *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*, Aug. 29, 2018, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video\\_haber/1067762/ABD\\_ye\\_tepki\\_icin\\_soyadini\\_degistirmek\\_istiyor.html?platform=hootsuite](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video_haber/1067762/ABD_ye_tepki_icin_soyadini_degistirmek_istiyor.html?platform=hootsuite).

51 Daren Butler, "Erdogan Invokes Patriotism, Islam as Lira Remains under Pressure," *Reuters.com*, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-currency-erdogan/erdogan-invokes-patriotism-islam-as-lira-remains-under-pressure-idUSKCN1L500A>.

52 Hümeyra Pamuk, "Turkey Is a 'Target of Economic War,'" *Reuters.com*, Aug. 11, 2018, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUKKBN1KW08S>.

53 "Trump Doubles Metal Tariffs on Turkey," *Ahval News*, Aug. 10, 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/donald-trump/trump-doubles-metal-tariffs-turkey>.

54 Richard Haass, "Economic Sanctions: Too Much of a Bad Thing," *Brookings Policy Brief Series*, June 1, 1998, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/economic-sanctions-too-much-of-a-bad-thing/>.

55 Tal Axelrod, "GOP Senators Say Erdogan White House Invitation Should Be Revoked," *The Hill*, Oct. 16, 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/466075-gop-senators-says-erdogan-invitation-to-white-house-should-be-revoked>.

56 Ishaan Tharoor, "Trump's Enormous Gift to Erdogan," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/18/trumps-enormous-gift-erdogan/>.





to Erdogan that he could temper his legislative branch's push for sanctions and has boasted to his own staff about his ability to get the Turkish leader on his good side.<sup>57</sup> The penalties from the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act are yet to be specified much less applied. The confirmation of U.S. Ambassador David Satterfield will hopefully clear up some of the mixed messaging that took place after the post was vacated in October 2017. Yet, even the most talented envoy cannot correct for a president sabotaging — whether unwittingly or deliberately — efforts to deter a state's behavior through threat of sanctions. Failure to uphold best practices of deterrent coercion through sanctions aside, what the U.S. foreign policy establishment failed to grasp sufficiently was that the United States cannot persuade Turkey whenever it wishes. The identity of Erdogan's Turkey demands that it resist.

## Conclusion

Given the widespread (and by no means Justice and Development Party-specific) anti-Americanism that has proven so politically useful, why should Erdogan adhere to U.S. demands, particularly when they are so haphazardly made? Why should he act in ways that are contrary to his vision for Turkey's foreign policy role in the region? Why wouldn't he remind voters that the United States refused to hand over the man whom much of Turkey blames for the July 2016 coup attempt that cost over 260 Turkish citizens their lives?

Admittedly the underlying logic of the argument made here does not help advance the debate of how to persuade Turkey to comply with U.S. suggestions, demands, or threats. Indeed, I argue that even taking such an approach toward Turkey's current recalcitrance sets U.S. foreign policymakers up for disappointment. Even mired in an economic crisis and facing impending sanctions, Turkey pursued an aggressive course in the Eastern Mediterranean over the summer of 2019, demonstrating that Erdogan's Turkey will not be deterred from seeking its own path to energy independence. In one sense, the United States could see this as a positive development: What Greece and the Republic of Cyprus deem to be Turkey's "illegal" drilling may indicate a desire to avoid becoming too dependent on Russia and Iran for energy. This is the same dependence U.S. policymakers and analysts are

worried about when they ask "Who lost Turkey?" However, framing the question in this way displays precisely the attitudes that help bolster Erdogan's quest, however foolhardy it may be, for agency, independence, and even leadership in a region that has been dominated by larger powers since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. ●

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Photo: [The Kremlin](#)

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57 Pinar Tremblay, "Erdogan's Friendship with Trump Has Extra Benefits," *Al-Monitor*, 9 October 2019: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/turkey-united-states-why-akp-supporters-pray-for-trump.html>.

