

# THE FADING OF OLD IRRITANTS: U.S.- TÜRKİYE RELATIONS IN A POST-ASSAD LANDSCAPE

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ADAM WEINSTEIN &  
STEVEN SIMON



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# Executive Summary

The U.S.–Türkiye relationship today is a fraught partnership marked by discord and strategic misalignment — particularly within the context of the Syrian Civil War but long before it as well. With the fading of old irritants in a post–Assad Syrian political landscape, a more stable and cooperative U.S.–Türkiye relationship is possible — an opportunity the Trump administration should seize.

The United States and Türkiye, though NATO allies, have historically lacked the shared values that make the transactionalism inherent in alliance frameworks easier to manage. As such, tensions have arisen when the strategic interests of each country or domestic politics have diverged. The Syrian Civil War, particularly since the emergence of the ISIS caliphate in 2014, illustrated this division starkly.

While initially supportive of the mission to defeat ISIS in Syria, Türkiye became disillusioned with the military campaign once the United States partnered with the Kurdish–led People’s Protection Units, or YPG. To Türkiye, the YPG is an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, a militant Kurdish group that the country has fought since the early 1980s and views as an existential challenge. This misalignment of primary objectives in Syria created a fraught dynamic between the U.S. and Türkiye.

In December 2024, Bashar al–Assad’s regime fell following a successful military campaign by Hay’at Tahrir al–Sham, or HTS, a Sunni Islamist group with close ties to Türkiye. While HTS’s rule moving forward is precarious, the United States and Türkiye share a common interest in preventing renewed civil strife in Syria. A resumed war could create another wave of asylum migration to Türkiye and beyond, stimulate deeper Israeli involvement, renew Iranian attempts to influence developments, and run counter to a broadly shared international interest in a unitary Syrian state.

President Trump has expressed a desire to withdraw American troops from Syria and a willingness to permit greater Turkish influence in northern Syria.

To advance a more cooperative U.S.–Türkiye relationship, this brief recommends the following:

- The Trump administration should establish a formal working group with Türkiye on Syria, bringing together intelligence, military, diplomatic, and economic channels.
- Türkiye and Kurdish groups should engage in backchannel diplomacy to promote Kurdish integration into a functioning Syrian state and protect the Kurds against human rights abuses.
- The United States and Türkiye should rebuild strategic trust through targeted defense cooperation, resuming U.S. arms sales to Türkiye contingent on its cooperation in Syria and Iraq, and expanding U.S.–Türkiye joint training and NATO exercises.
- Türkiye and Israel should engage in stabilization dialogue to mitigate tensions over their respective zones of influence in Syria and to coordinate on eastern Mediterranean energy development.

## Introduction

During the Cold War, U.S.–Türkiye relations were anchored in their shared NATO alliance and mutual distrust of the Soviet Union. Today, headlines about tensions between Washington and Ankara often focus on Türkiye's balancing act between the United States and Russia. In particular, Ankara maintains deep economic ties with Moscow, even as Washington has until recently remained committed to Russia's military defeat in Ukraine. But the more consequential fractures in the relationship have emerged in the Middle East.



A major turning point came in 2003, when Türkiye's parliament refused to allow U.S. troops to launch the Iraq invasion from Turkish soil. Still, Türkiye contributed noncombat forces to Afghanistan and was initially embraced by the Obama administration as a model of democratic Islamism for the region. However, the emergence of the Islamic State organization, or ISIS, exposed irreconcilable differences in priorities. The United States helped mobilize the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF — dominated by the People's Protection Units, known by the Kurdish acronym YPG, a predominantly Kurdish Syrian militia — to defeat ISIS without deploying large numbers of American ground troops.<sup>1</sup> But for Türkiye, the YPG is inseparable from the Kurdistan Workers Party, known by the Kurdish acronym PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization by both Ankara and Washington. The PKK occupies a similar place in Türkiye's national security mindset as al-Qaeda does for the United States, except the former group has an even longer and bloodier history of attacks inside the country. Additionally, the PKK also engenders the added fear, from Ankara's perspective, that it could eventually fracture the country through the secession of the Kurdish-majority southeast, a region that has seen intense urban warfare as recently as the past decade.

This brief examines how and why U.S. and Turkish interests have drifted apart, especially since ISIS emerged in 2014. It explores what the strategic costs of this misalignment have been for Washington and Ankara, whether they were justified, and whether recent shifts in the region might open the door to a more aligned, even if still transactional, relationship. Despite being a NATO member state, Türkiye has consistently charted its own course even when at odds with U.S. policies. Türkiye is, in many ways, a revisionist power in the Middle East, seeking to reclaim influence once held by the Ottoman Empire. Like Iran and Saudi Arabia, Türkiye views itself as a natural leader of the Muslim world — a view with some merit given Turkic cultural hegemony in Central Asia, influence in Syria and Iraq, and strong ties to countries like Pakistan.

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<sup>1</sup> The SDF also includes some Arab units.

While Türkiye's relationship with Israel under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long been fraught, it had been warming prior to the current Gaza war. Despite Erdoğan's sharp rhetoric and the partial suspension of economic ties, the two countries have continued to engage over redlines in Syria since the collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. This reflects Türkiye's pragmatic posture — more strategic than ideological — and, from a traditional U.S. security standpoint, the fact that its influence in the region is still preferable to Iran's. With Türkiye showing renewed interest in asserting itself across the Middle East — particularly in Syria and Iraq — and appearing willing to manage tensions with Israel, and with the Trump administration seemingly prepared to step back from northeast Syria militarily and delegate security to partners in the region while entertaining ties with Damascus's new government, there is potential for improvement in U.S.–Türkiye relations.

Other factors are also helping to ease tensions in U.S.–Türkiye relations. These include the death of Erdoğan ally-turned-rival Fethullah Gülen, who was blamed for the 2016 coup attempt and whom many in Türkiye believe was protected by U.S. intelligence due to his exile having been in Pennsylvania; the exit of Senator Bob Menendez, a leading critic of Türkiye in Congress; and the positive personal rapport between Presidents Trump and Erdoğan.

Seizing this opportunity to build closer relations, however, will require Washington to recognize that Syria and northern Iraq are vital national interests for Ankara, far more so than the U.S. partnership with Kurdish forces. These territories border Türkiye directly, and Ankara cannot afford to disengage from them, unlike Washington, which retains the option to withdraw.

# A fraught partnership: U.S.–Türkiye tensions amid divergent Middle East priorities

## U.S.–Türkiye strategic misalignment

The U.S.–Türkiye relationship is marked by mutual distrust, a lack of shared purpose, and, in Türkiye, notable public resentment. The relationship remains largely transactional, raising numerous questions: Is this model sustainable? What would follow if the United States withdrew from Syria? How can Washington assure Ankara that it does not back any Kurdish threat to Türkiye's territorial integrity or the foundations of its republic? Where do arms sales and the NATO partnership fit in? Can the relationship be reset?

These questions reflect the deep complexities facing U.S.–Türkiye ties in the Middle East. U.S. foreign policy often overlooks how partners and adversaries perceive their own national security interests. This blind spot, especially pronounced after U.S. interventions since the September 11 attacks in 2001, has hurt relations with Türkiye. Washington has failed to fully grasp how seriously Ankara has viewed the PKK — not only as a threat but as a national trauma.<sup>2</sup> By drawing semantic lines between the SDF, YPG, and PKK, the United States deepened suspicion and fueled conspiratorial thinking in Türkiye. From Ankara's perspective, Washington's defense of partnering with its archenemy amounts to diplomatic gaslighting. From the perspective of Turkish officials, if these groups were truly separate, as Washington formally claims, then the United States should assist Türkiye in defeating the PKK.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In private discussions, some U.S. officials expressed an understanding of Türkiye's conundrum with Syria as a neighbor. Author interview with U.S. officials, May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Author interview with Turkish official, 2024.

Meanwhile, Türkiye has underestimated how much groups like ISIS still shape U.S. security concerns. But Syria is a vital national interest for Türkiye, unlike for the United States.

To understand Ankara's view of the PKK, it is essential to recognize the scale and longevity of the conflict. Since 1984, more than 40,000 people have been killed — more than double the number of Americans lost in the 9/11 attacks and all subsequent Global War on Terror conflicts — with civilians making up a significant share.<sup>4</sup> Until recently, the conflict remained an active war, though largely absent from Western headlines.

According to data from the International Crisis Group, between July 2015 and June 2025, 5,229 people were killed in Türkiye and 1,999 in Iraq due to the conflict. In Türkiye, most deaths were PKK militants (2,679) and state security forces (1,255) along with 524 civilians. The cities with the highest death tolls were Şırnak, Hakkari, Diyarbakır, Mardin, and Tunceli. But the violence has also reached major cities like Ankara and İstanbul, highlighting its national reach. In Iraq, the death toll has included 1,628 PKK militants, 246 Turkish security forces, and 125 civilians.<sup>5</sup>

During the Clinton administration, Washington and Ankara were largely aligned on the PKK. The United States designated the PKK a foreign terrorist organization in 1997, turned a blind eye to Turkish anti-PKK operations in northern Iraq, helped broker peace between Türkiye and Iraqi Kurdish parties to sideline the PKK, and aided in the 1999 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. But the 2003 invasion of Iraq caused a deeper rift in U.S.–Türkiye priorities than even the 1990–91 Gulf War had, because it

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<sup>4</sup> Daren Butler and Ece Toksabay, “Kurdish PKK Ends 40-Year Turkey Insurgency, Bringing Hope of Regional Stability,” Reuters, May 12, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurdish-pkk-dissolves-after-decades-struggle-with-turkey-news-agency-close-2025-05-12>.

<sup>5</sup> Data scraped on June 23, 2025 from International Crisis Group, “Türkiye’s PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer,” <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkiyes-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>.

empowered Kurdish groups, destabilized Türkiye's southern border, and was seen by Turkish lawmakers as both unjust and contrary to their country's national sovereignty.<sup>6</sup>

The 2010s were a frustrating decade for both Washington and Ankara. The Obama administration withdrew most U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011 without securing a follow-on agreement, leaving the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad poorly equipped to track Iraq's unraveling. Meanwhile, Erdoğan viewed the Arab Spring as a chance to reshape the region along Islamist democratic lines but found Türkiye getting mired in Syria, opposing the Assad regime, and receiving millions of Syrian refugees. The rise of ISIS and a pan-Kurdish resurgence in northern Syria undermined both countries' aims: the U.S. relied on Kurdish forces to fight ISIS, while Türkiye saw them as a direct threat. Tensions escalated further as Erdoğan's government grew increasingly authoritarian and, in 2016, purchased Russia's S-400 missile system, prompting U.S. sanctions. That decision was driven in part by Syria: both Ankara's anger at Washington's support for the YPG and its effort to stabilize ties with Moscow after downing a Russian jet in 2015. Russia's green light for Türkiye's Operation Euphrates Shield only reinforced that pivot. The failed 2016 coup against Erdoğan compounded mistrust, fueling conspiratorial and anti-American sentiment across Turkish society.

Türkiye's goals in Syria had been straightforward up until fall 2024: contain the YPG, manage opposition groups, stop pro-Assad forces' advance in southern Idlib, and prevent another refugee wave. Its condition for cooperation with the United States was equally clear: no YPG, which it saw (and still sees) as a rebranded PKK. Ankara also has no plans to leave Iraq or abandon its expanding security corridor — aiming to reach PKK positions on Mount Gara regardless of objections from Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil, or Washington — an ambition it has steadily advanced.

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<sup>6</sup> "Ex-Minister Reveals Why Turkish Parliament Voted 'No' to Participation in Iraq War," *Daily Sabah*, Feb. 15, 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2016/02/15/ex-minister-reveals-why-turkish-parliament-voted-no-to-participation-in-iraq-war>.



These diverging aims have created overlapping zones of influence and hindered genuine U.S.–Türkiye cooperation in the region. Still, the changing regime in Damascus, Trump–era openness to greater Turkish influence in post–Assad Syria, and shared concerns over ISIS could offer a path to closer alignment. Türkiye would likely favor continued U.S. military involvement in Iraq, despite welcoming a U.S. drawdown from northeastern Syria, because it sees the U.S. presence as key to strengthening Iraq’s capabilities and limiting Iranian influence. For its part, Türkiye is investing in the \$17 billion Iraqi Development Road project from Iraq’s southern al–Faw port to the Turkish border, which, much to Tehran’s dismay, effectively bypasses Iran. Ankara sees the project not just as an economic initiative but as a strategic effort to help strengthen Iraq’s ability to resist Iranian influence.<sup>7</sup>

## Strategic and regional costs of U.S.–Türkiye discord

The long-standing U.S. concern about the costs of discord has focused on the risk of horizontal escalation by Ankara. Thus, Washington habitually worries that bilateral disputes about Middle Eastern issues, usually relating to Kurdish and Turkish security, would tempt Ankara to coerce Washington by imposing costs within the NATO arena or, conversely, using pressure on the Syrian Kurds as leverage in Brussels. As a practical matter, the first of these reciprocal dynamics is the one that has generated the greatest anxiety in Washington.

A careful look at the record of the past five years, however, reveals that both Türkiye and the United States see it as in their interest to wall off disputes in one theater from business in the other (see Appendix). In most years, compartmentalization was achieved, with tensions in Syria and Iraq not fully disrupting NATO relations. The exception was 2019 (and the years leading up to it), when Türkiye’s incursion into Syria and NATO veto threats led to direct spillover, breaking down the separation between arenas. Otherwise, the United States and Türkiye have generally shown a consistent

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<sup>7</sup> Author interview with Turkish official, 2024.

ability to disagree intensely in one domain while cooperating or managing in the other. Thus, although prudence in a delicate alliance is always appropriate, both countries have worked to ensure that the costs of discord are contained and effectively managed.

## How a turbulent Middle East tests and shapes

### U.S.–Türkiye relations

#### From rapprochement to rupture: Gaza’s impact on Türkiye–Israel ties

Türkiye was the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel in 1949, and for decades the two maintained a quiet but strategically important relationship. In the 1990s, ties deepened, as Israel provided weapons and intelligence to support Türkiye’s fight against the PKK — particularly valuable at a time when U.S. arms sales were restricted due to Ankara’s human rights record. Though Turkish public opinion has long supported the Palestinian cause, the military historically promoted ties with Israel. In January 1997, after the Ankara suburb of Sincan’s conservative local government hosted a Jerusalem Night event, featuring posters of Palestinian militants deemed terrorists by Israel and speeches by the mayor and Iranian ambassador, Ankara responded within a week by sending tanks into the district and arresting the mayor and deputy mayor.<sup>8</sup> Relations cooled after the 1999 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, as Türkiye no longer saw Israel’s support as vital. The decline continued through the 2000s, especially as the Turkish military lost influence in politics and after the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* incident when relations between the two countries were severed.<sup>9</sup> Under

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<sup>8</sup> Gönül Tol, *Erdoğan’s War: A Strongman’s Struggle at Home and in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 19.

<sup>9</sup> The MV *Mavi Marmara* was the flagship of a 2010 aid flotilla led by Turkish activist groups to break the Israeli naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. A nighttime Israeli commando raid on May 31 that year resulted in the deaths of nine Turkish activists and one Turkish American. The raid sparked a major diplomatic crisis between Türkiye and Israel, leading to a freeze in relations and the withdrawal of ambassadors. In the years that followed, Türkiye demanded an official apology from Israel, which it did not receive until 2013. During a phone call, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu apologized to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for the loss of life and agreed to compensate the families of the victims. Relations

Erdoğan, Israel is no longer able to counterbalance two competing Turkish power centers — the elected government and an Israel–friendly military establishment — but deals solely with a unified, assertive leadership.

This began to turn around after relations resumed in 2016. Bilateral trade between Türkiye and Israel had reached around \$7 billion annually before Ankara suspended it in May 2024, conditioning its resumption on a Gaza ceasefire.<sup>10</sup> The discovery of major gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, particularly Israel’s Leviathan and Tamar fields, had spurred interest in energy cooperation, with both countries eyeing a pipeline through Türkiye to supply Europe. Just weeks before the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in 2023, Erdoğan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met for the first time ever, discussing joint drilling and pipeline plans.<sup>11</sup> A cautious thaw was underway, but it quickly unraveled as the Turkish president condemned Israel’s actions in Gaza, prompting Israeli trade retaliation.

Erdoğan had initially hoped to strike a balance. He aimed to maintain a close patronage relationship with Hamas while preserving functional ties with both the United States and Israel. He sought a diplomatic middle ground — maintaining normal relations with Israel, casting himself as a potential mediator, protecting energy deals, and avoiding isolation, particularly given Greece’s strong relationship with Israel, while also hosting

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were normalized again in 2016. See Harriet Sherwood and Ewen MacAskill, “Netanyahu Apologises to Turkish PM for Israeli Role in Gaza Flotilla Raid,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/22/israel-apologises-turkey-gaza-flotilla-deaths>.

<sup>10</sup> Ceyda Caglayan and Huseyin Hayatsever, “Turkey Halts Trade With Israel Until Permanent Gaza Ceasefire,” Reuters, May 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-israel-trade-halted-until-permanent-gaza-ceasefire-2024-05-03>.

<sup>11</sup> “Erdogan Says Turkey, Israel to Take Steps in Energy Drilling Soon, Media Report,” Reuters, Sept. 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-israel-take-steps-energy-drilling-soon-media-2023-09-21>; Guy Azriel, “Israel Considering Pipeline to Turkey to Increase Gas Exports,” *I24 News*, Aug. 29, 2023, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/economy/1693292330-israel-examines-construction-of-gas-pipeline-to-turkey>.

representatives of Israel's archenemy, Hamas.<sup>12</sup> But as the Gaza war has dragged on, Erdoğan has pivoted toward a populist, anti-Israel stance. Türkiye recalled its ambassador, Turkish Airlines halted flights to Israeli airports, and the government adopted some of the harshest rhetoric in the region against Israeli actions – second only to Iran – while tightly managing and suppressing grassroots protests that strayed from official messaging. In December 2023, nearly three months into the war, Erdoğan declared, “They used to speak ill of [Adolf] Hitler. What difference do you have from Hitler? They are going to make us miss Hitler. Is what this Netanyahu is doing any less than what Hitler did? It is not.”<sup>13</sup>

## Israel and Türkiye divide up Syria

Unlike Gaza, the new government in Damascus and Ankara's growing influence there cannot be managed through hostile rhetoric or frozen relations, as neither Israel nor Türkiye can afford to disengage from one another. Syria's future is a vital interest for both Türkiye and Israel with disagreements carrying the potential for rapid escalation. Both countries benefit from the mediation of Azerbaijan, an Israeli ally and a cultural and linguistic sister to Türkiye.

At the time of writing, Türkiye had not involved itself in the June 2025 fight between Iran and Israel, apart from appealing to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation for Islamic solidarity and condemning the Israeli strikes as state terrorism. There is no publicly available evidence that Türkiye mobilized proxies to punish Azerbaijan for its alleged support for the Israeli offensive against Iran. Türkiye and Iran share core interests, particularly in the energy sector, where the former is an important consumer of Iranian oil and Turkmen gas (which has to be transported through Iran), and in their respective

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<sup>12</sup> John T. Psaropoulos, “Once Pro-Palestinian, Greece Is Now One of Israel's Closest European Allies,” Al Jazeera, Oct. 31, 2023, <https://aje.io/u1dgig>.

<sup>13</sup> “Turkey's Erdogan Says Israeli PM Netanyahu No Different from Hitler,” Reuters, Dec. 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-israeli-pm-netanyahu-no-different-hitler-2023-12-27>.

approaches to Kurdish aspirations for autonomy.<sup>14</sup> Both Iran and Türkiye are wary of their sizable Kurdish minority populations. They also share an antipathy to Israel but, despite confrontational rhetoric, Türkiye is generally careful not to cross any lines that bring it into direct conflict with the Jewish state.

On the other hand, Iran and Türkiye do compete for influence in the Caucasus and in northern Iraq and, more generally, for primacy in the Middle East region. In that context, Israel's humbling of Iran and Tehran's exclusion from Syria by the transitional Sunni-dominated government in Damascus would likely be tacitly welcomed by Türkiye.

The degradation of Iran's Axis of Resistance created opportunities for both Israel and Türkiye, but the benefits appear greater for Ankara. Türkiye sees Syria as a vital national interest and a key geography tied to its historical stature and leadership in the Muslim world. Israel, by contrast, views Syria primarily as a liability to be managed. For Israel, two concerns dominate. First, Syrian Interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's rule is fragile. He could be replaced by someone more extreme, Syria could relapse into civil war, or Iran's axis might reassert itself. Second, having previously been a leader in ISIS and the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda, Sharaa may not be truly reformed but could consolidate power only to revert to jihadist aims. Historically, Israel has seen the Iranian threat in Syria as more pressing than that of Sunni jihadists, evidenced by its past willingness to arm jihadist groups near the occupied Golan Heights to keep Iran away from the Quneitra line, the de facto border from 1974 until 2024. But that was within a broader balance of power. Today, Israel increasingly fears that Iran's Shi'i axis has been replaced by a potentially more dangerous, Turkish-led Sunni one — beginning with Syria.

This shift is reflected in the report of the Nagel Commission, a 2024 Israeli government inquiry into the country's security capabilities, which assessed that one possible trajectory for Türkiye and Syria was that, "when the 'noise of the revolution' and the

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<sup>14</sup> Despite this shared concern over Kurdish autonomy, some within Türkiye's security establishment believe the PKK receives some support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.



desire to appear competent subside, the true face of ‘Assad’s replacement’ will be revealed, and it will not be better, even if it takes a long time to restore its ability, which was severely damaged by the [Israel Defense Forces] after the collapse of Assad and his army. Establishing strong ties with Türkiye will shorten the process of creating a new Syrian–Turkish threat.”<sup>15</sup> Some have interpreted this as signaling Israel was anticipating confrontation with Türkiye, though Nagel himself later said this interpretation was exaggerated.<sup>16</sup> For now, Turkish and Israeli zones of influence in Syria remain largely separate, as detailed later – making direct clashes avoidable, at least in the short term.

## The geography of mistrust in U.S.–Türkiye relations over Syria, ISIS, and the SDF

### *Kobane and the beginning of the U.S.–SDF partnership against ISIS*

While Washington had long expressed sympathy and some support for Ankara’s fight against the PKK, the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014 prompted the Obama administration to seek local partners while avoiding major U.S. troop deployments. A \$500 million train-and-equip program led by Major General Michael Nagata aimed to build a “moderate” Syrian opposition force, but it failed due to defections, vetting issues, and rebels prioritizing the struggle against the Assad regime over that against ISIS.<sup>17</sup> By late 2015, the program was shelved, and the United States pivoted to backing the Kurdish–led YPG.<sup>18</sup> This shift was reinforced by Türkiye’s refusal to support Kurdish

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<sup>15</sup> “Committee to Examine Israel Defense Budget and IDF Force Build Up: Final Report,” Dec. 31, 2024, uploaded by the American Technion Society to <https://online.fliphtml5.com/lymuw/swdc>.

<sup>16</sup> “The ‘Nagel Committee Report,’” American Technion Society, March 10, 2025, <https://ats.org/our-impact/the-nagel-committee-report-evolving-israels-defense-strategy>.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco, “Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service report R43727 (June 9, 2015): 5, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43727.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, “Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>.

civilians in the Syrian border town of Kobane during its siege by ISIS, viewing it as a clash between two militant groups that the YPG was likely to lose.<sup>19</sup>

Following the YPG's successful defense of Kobane in 2014, U.S. officials recognized its effectiveness and rebranded it as part of the newly formed Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, to sustain the partnership while hoping to minimize tensions with Türkiye.<sup>20</sup>

Formed in 2015, the SDF became Washington's most reliable ground partner in Syria — a multiethnic coalition of Kurdish, Arab, Syriac/Assyrian militias, with the YPG at its core.<sup>21</sup>

Washington saw no alternative to the SDF.<sup>22</sup> The YPG originated in a 2004 Kurdish uprising in the Syrian city of Qamishli and gained control in northern Syria after Assad regime forces' 2012 withdrawal, enabling the Democratic Union Party, known by the Kurdish acronym PYD — its political parent organization — to assume local control.<sup>23</sup>

The militia remains closely tied to the PKK through shared leadership, ideology, and personnel.<sup>24</sup> The SDF's inclusive branding aimed to mask these links and project a broader Syrian identity, despite its command structure being rooted in PYD/PKK networks.<sup>25</sup> The U.S.–SDF partnership marked a strategic shift away from building a “moderate” opposition to Assad and toward supporting an ideologically cohesive, if politically contentious, militia.

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<sup>19</sup> Chase Winter, “The Fall of Kobane: The Impact on Turkey, Kurds and the United States,” *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 14, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/10/the-fall-of-kobane-the-impact-on-turkey-kurds-and-the-united-states>.

<sup>20</sup> Brandi Meoni, “Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces: The U.S. Campaign against ISIS in Syria and Its Implications for Turkish–American Relations” (Master’s thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2022), 14–16; Joshua M. M. Portzer, “The People’s Protection Units’ Branding Problem: Syrian Kurds and Potential Destabilization in Northeastern Syria,” *Military Review* (May–June 2020): 92–103, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2020/Portzer-Peoples-Protection-Unit/>.

<sup>21</sup> Meoni, “Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces,” 14–16.

<sup>22</sup> Author interview with U.S. officials, May 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Portzer, “The People’s Protection Units’ Branding Problem”; Meoni, “Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces,” 26–27.

<sup>24</sup> Meoni, “Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces,” 21–26.

<sup>25</sup> Meoni, “Creating the Syrian Democratic Forces,” 14–17; Portzer, “The People’s Protection Units’ Branding Problem.”

At the outset of ISIS's 2014 offensive into northeastern Syria, Türkiye expressed willingness to deploy alongside the United States, hoping to influence the campaign and prevent Kurdish militias from consolidating power along its border. Ankara claims Washington rejected the offer to favor the Kurds and avoid committing large numbers of U.S. troops. U.S. officials, however, have cited more complex reasons.

Brett McGurk, the U.S. special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS from 2015 to 2018, was a frequent critic of Türkiye's role. In a 2017 Middle East Institute talk, he drew sharp reactions from Ankara by calling the rebel-held Syrian city of Idlib "the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11" and suggesting Türkiye enabled al-Qaeda leaders to move into the area.<sup>26</sup> In a 2019 *Foreign Affairs* essay, McGurk accused Türkiye of refusing to close border crossings used by ISIS to smuggle in foreign fighters and of opposing coalition efforts to save Kobane. "Faced with Turkey's intransigence," he wrote, "the United States began to partner more closely with the Syrian Kurdish fighters, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), who had defended [Kobane],"<sup>27</sup> adding that "the United States must also accept that Turkey, although a treaty ally, is not an effective partner."<sup>28</sup>

### *What lies beneath Ankara's alarm at the U.S.–Kurdish alliance in Syria*

Ankara's deep alarm over U.S. support for the YPG cannot be understood without tracing the rise and fall of Türkiye's Kurdish peace process. The George W. Bush administration's troop surge in Iraq, coupled with firmer support for Ankara, helped create a brief window where the PKK showed some openness to shifting from terrorism to a political process. Between 2009 and 2011, Türkiye launched the so-called Kurdish Opening, a series of reforms easing restrictions on the Kurdish language and culture, which evolved into a formal peace process involving direct talks with imprisoned PKK

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<sup>26</sup> "U.S. Envoy's Turkey–al-Qaeda Remarks Provocative: Ankara," *Kurdistan24*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/index.php/en/story/372190/US-envoy%27s-Turkey--al-Qaeda-remarks-provocative-Ankara>.

<sup>27</sup> Brett McGurk, "Hard Truths in Syria," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May/June 2019): 76, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2019-04-16/hard-truths-syria>.

<sup>28</sup> McGurk, "Hard Truths in Syria," 82.

leader Abdullah Öcalan lasting from 2013 to 2015. A 2014 legislative package known as the Law to End Terrorism and Strengthen Social Integration provided a legal framework for dialogue, while separate regional “wise persons” committees were formed to build public support, together helping to sustain the two-year ceasefire.<sup>29</sup>

But by 2015, the process unraveled. Türkiye-based PKK-aligned youth militias declared self-rule in towns like Cizre and Nusaybin, mimicking the Syrian YPG’s autonomy model across the border.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, after an unexpected performance in Türkiye’s parliamentary elections in June of that year, the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, or HDP, was able to block the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, from a parliamentary majority, showing democratic progress was possible but also threatening the PKK’s relevance.<sup>31</sup> Some PKK factions resumed violence, and Ankara abandoned talks in favor of military crackdowns in southeastern Türkiye.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the YPG’s expanding presence in Syria convinced Turkish officials they were confronting a cross-border Kurdish project. Washington’s deepening support and coordination with the YPG not only amplified Ankara’s alarm and hardened its stance but also intensified

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<sup>29</sup> Cenker Korhan Demir, “Counter-Terrorism in the Age of Hard Power: Reassessing Turkey’s Policy against the PKK,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 25, no. 1 (Nov. 2024): 99–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2432719>.

<sup>30</sup> See International Crisis Group, “Managing Turkey’s PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin,” *Europe Report* no. 243 (May 2, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/243-managing-turkeys-pkk-conflict-case-nusaybin>. This report details the Turkish government’s military operations in Nusaybin, a predominantly Kurdish town on the Syrian border, which became a focal point of conflict between state forces and Kurdish militants, particularly the PKK-affiliated Civil Protection Units, or YPS, and its youth wing, YDG-H. Following a PKK attack in Nov. 2015, Turkish authorities imposed a series of extended curfews beginning in March 2016, culminating in a 134-day siege that resulted in intense urban warfare. Militants had dug trenches, erected barricades, and declared autonomy in parts of the city. By mid-2016, roughly 60,000 of Nusaybin’s 83,000 residents had fled, while more than 20,000 remained trapped amid heavy fighting. An estimated 25 percent of the town’s housing was destroyed, with more than 6,000 homes later demolished as part of state-led reconstruction. The government’s post-conflict response involved centralized rebuilding efforts with limited local consultation and offered compensation payments amounting to only about 12 percent of pre-conflict property values. The Crisis Group report criticizes the state’s overreliance on militarized solutions and its failure to adequately reintegrate displaced residents, restore democratic governance, or address the political grievances that fueled the conflict, warning that such shortcomings risk entrenching long-term instability in southeastern Türkiye.

<sup>31</sup> “Kurdish Party in Coalition Talks,” *DW*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-davutoglu-talks-with-pro-kurdish-hdp/a-18586017>.

<sup>32</sup> Demir, “Counter-Terrorism in the Age of Hard Power,” 101–2.

nationalist sentiment among the Turkish public. Support for harsh anti-PKK measures has historically surged when the group is seen as foreign-backed, such as through ties to the United States or support from regimes like Assad's.<sup>33</sup> In short, the PKK and Türkiye were unable to reach a peace due to rising Kurdish autonomous territorial control in Syria, which intensified nationalist fears within Türkiye and separatist ambitions within the PKK.

Between 2014–16, northern Syria was divided into hardening zones of influence, with Türkiye in the northwest and the United States backing Kurdish-led forces in the northeast. The result was a prolonged stalemate between U.S. and Turkish priorities that strained relations — perhaps more than most in Washington appreciated — until the rapid takeover of the former al-Qaeda rebels in Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, disrupted the status quo.

## The new HTS-led Syria and Türkiye's power play

If Syria is strategically important to Russia, a problem to be managed for the United States and Europe, and a liability for Israel and Iraq, then for Türkiye it is all of these things. Even more importantly, Syria is tied to Ottoman history and a powerful symbol in the Turkish national imagination, especially for Erdoğan.

So-called "neo-Ottomanism" first emerged in the 1980s under Prime Minister Turgut Özal, who aimed to revive ties with countries in former Ottoman territories by blending nostalgia with renewed influence in the Middle East.<sup>34</sup> The concept gained real traction under the AKP government led by Erdoğan, particularly during the foreign ministry of Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009–14) and through his doctrine of "strategic depth."<sup>35</sup> Initially, this

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<sup>33</sup> Ali Sarihan, "Explaining the Severity of the Turkey-PKK Conflict," *Democracy and Security* (pre-print pub., April 22, 2025): 4, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2025.2495550>.

<sup>34</sup> Ali Omar Forozish and Halil Avni Güzelyurt, "A Sultan's Shadow: The Truth about Neo-Ottomanism," *Fair Observer*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/turkey-news/a-sultans-shadow-the-truth-about-neo-ottomanism/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* [Strategic Depth: Türkiye's International Position] (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).



approach emphasized diplomacy and soft power, especially in Syria. Davutoğlu introduced the “zero problems with the neighbors” policy, promoting pragmatic diplomacy, economic integration, and noninterference to foster stable ties with regional actors, including Assad’s Syria.<sup>36</sup> Türkiye even served as a mediator in disputes involving Syria and Israel as well as between the Palestinian factions of Fatah and Hamas.

The Arab Spring marked a turning point. Erdoğan abandoned neutrality, backed Syrian opposition forces, and demanded Assad’s removal. His vocal support for the Muslim Brotherhood and condemnation of Egypt’s 2013 military coup further strained ties with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. As ideology replaced pragmatism, Türkiye’s regional relationships frayed, turning “zero problems” into, as some put it, “zero friends.”<sup>37</sup> Davutoğlu’s original vision of “strategic depth,” grounded in regional integration and soft power, ultimately gave way to a more assertive neo-Ottomanism focused on projecting Turkish influence, even at the cost of regional friction.

Türkiye became increasingly entrenched militarily in northern Syria,<sup>38</sup> backing the opposition in the northwest and deploying thousands of troops across Idlib and Aleppo Governorates.<sup>39</sup> Although Erdoğan invested significant political capital in supporting Syrian rebels — establishing a safe zone in the northwest, and hosting millions of Syrian refugees (a deeply unpopular move domestically) — the Kurdish issue always remained Ankara’s top priority. This became evident when, after years of demanding Assad’s removal and backing the opposition, Türkiye began engaging with Damascus through Russian mediation.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, Erdoğan made clear that he was prepared to

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<sup>36</sup> Gencer Özcan, “Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours,” *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* (2012): 59–63, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/policy-of-zero-problems-with-the-neighbours>.

<sup>37</sup> Piotr Zalewski, “How Turkey Went from ‘Zero Problems’ to Zero Friends,” *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 22, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/22/how-turkey-went-from-zero-problems-to-zero-friends>.

<sup>38</sup> Cameron McMillan, Sinan Ciddi, and Bradley Bowman, “Time for a New Policy toward Erdogan,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, April 17, 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/04/17/time-for-a-new-policy-toward-erdogan>.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, “Syria: Transition and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service report RL33487 (March 11, 2025), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33487>; “Erdogan Open to Meeting al-Assad but Not to Withdrawal from Syria,” Al Jazeera, July 17, 2023, <https://aje.io/pru3i3>.

<sup>40</sup> “In Middle East, Once Improbable Ententes Set New Tone,” Reuters, May 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/middle-east-once-improbable-ententes-set-new-tone-2023-05-19/>.

launch new military incursions if no agreement could be reached.<sup>41</sup> In late 2022, Türkiye and the Assad regime, along with Russia and Iran, held their first high-level ministerial meeting since the war began.<sup>42</sup> Türkiye offered cooperation on counterterrorism and creating conditions for refugee repatriation,<sup>43</sup> signaling a willingness to withdraw troops if Syria's border could be secured from both Kurdish militias and ISIS.<sup>44</sup> As late as Nov. 2024, just three weeks before Assad fled Damascus, Turkish officials, including Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, stated that Türkiye had no intention of regime change in Syria,<sup>45</sup> supporting a political solution to preserve Syria's territorial integrity.<sup>46</sup>

During this period of dialogue, Ankara's rhetoric shifted. It stopped explicitly calling for Assad's ouster and instead focused on two priorities: (1) dismantling the YPG/PKK presence along its border and (2) facilitating the return of Syrian refugees.<sup>47</sup> In reality, Ankara was never fully committed to a diplomatic solution with the Assad regime and openly pursued a dual-track approach. However, this did not mean a negotiated settlement was impossible. The Assad regime also failed to seize the opportunity, feeling overly confident in its stability and maintaining maximalist positions. Turkish policy hitherto had focused on containing HTS in Idlib and attempting to moderate it

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18; Middle East Policy Council, "Putin–Assad Meeting in Moscow," *Fast Facts*, July 2024, <https://mepc.org/commentaries/putin-assad-meeting-in-moscow>.

<sup>41</sup> "Türkiye Warns of Escalating Threats If Syria Fails to Progress: Fidan," *TRT Global*, Nov. 23, 2024, <https://trt.global/world/article/18235812>.

<sup>42</sup> "Turkey, Syria, Russia and Iran in Highest-Level Talks since Syrian War," Reuters, May 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-syria-russia-iran-hold-highest-level-talks-since-syrian-war-2023-05>; Middle East Policy Council, "Putin–Assad Meeting in Moscow."

<sup>43</sup> "Turkey, Syria, Russia and Iran in Highest-Level Talks since Syrian War," Reuters.

<sup>44</sup> "Turkey, Syria, Russia and Iran in Highest-Level Talks since Syrian War," Reuters; Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Interview of H.E. Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Al-Jazeera English, 18 December 2024," <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-of-he-hakan-fidan--minister-of-foreign-affairs--al-jazeera-english--18-dece-mber-2024.en.mfa>.

<sup>45</sup> Tugba Altun and Mehmet Sah Yilmaz, "Türkiye Has No Intention of Aggression, Regime Change in Syria: Foreign Minister," *Anadolu Agency*, Nov. 23, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkiye-has-no-intention-of-aggression-regime-change-in-syria-foreign-minister/3402357>.

<sup>46</sup> "Türkiye Warns of Escalating Threats If Syria Fails to Progress," *TRT Global*.

<sup>47</sup> "Fidan Discusses Terror Threats and Regional Peace with German Counterpart," *TRT Global*, Dec. 20, 2024, <https://trt.global/world/article/18245685>; "Türkiye Warns of Escalating Threats If Syria Fails to Progress," *TRT Global*.

through border control, economic leverage, and occasional coercive pressure, but HTS was still an acceptable partner for Ankara due to the pragmatism of Ahmed al-Sharaa.

<sup>48</sup> Eventually, Ankara gave the green light to HTS's Nov./Dec. 2024 military campaign toward Aleppo and then Damascus, which advanced more quickly than either had anticipated.



*Map of Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq*

HTS is often misrepresented as a mere Turkish proxy. Türkiye's military presence was instrumental in preventing the Assad regime and its Russian partners from destroying

<sup>48</sup> Author interview with U.S. officials, May 2024.

HTS's enclave in Idlib, but Ankara's preferred partner in Syria was actually the rival Syrian National Army, or SNA. The SNA is a coalition of rebel factions with direct Turkish backing that was used to counter both the Assad regime and, more significantly, the SDF — particularly around Manbij and Tall Rif'at.<sup>49</sup> The SNA has played a more active role in Turkish military operations, including participating in joint offensives.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, HTS rose to power in part because it was not a proxy, instead prioritizing internal consolidation, governance, and the professionalization of its military.<sup>51</sup> However, since HTS took power, Türkiye has emerged as the new Syrian government's most significant external partner, with the Turkish foreign minister and intelligence chief among the first foreign officials to visit Damascus.

Before the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, it was debatable whether the neo-Ottoman framing of Türkiye's actions in the Middle East was meaningful or merely an exaggerated cliché. Now, it appears more relevant than ever. In Dec. 2024, Erdoğan told AKP party members: "I wonder what would have happened if the conditions had been different at the time when the First World War redefined the borders in our region? The cities we call Aleppo, Idlib, Damascus, and Raqqa would have been our provinces, like Antep, Hatay, and Urfa."<sup>52</sup>

There are clear political incentives for Erdoğan to frame events in Syria through a neo-Ottoman lens. At times, he paid a steep price for his gamble, from rising anti-Syrian sentiment in Turkish domestic politics due to the refugee influx, to

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<sup>49</sup> Ido Levy, "Supporting the SDF in Post-Assad Syria," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* no. 3967 (Dec. 13, 2024), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria>.

<sup>50</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Status of Syria's Transition after Two Months," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* no. 3994 (Feb. 12, 2025), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/status-syrias-transition-after-two-months>.

<sup>51</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Patient Efforts Behind Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Success in Aleppo," *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 3, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/the-patient-efforts-behind-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-success-in-aleppo>.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Ashura (@MichaelAshura), "#Erdogan announced the need to revise the results of the First World War," X, Dec. 14, 2024, <https://x.com/MichaelAshura/status/1867899222311469399>.

deteriorating ties with Gulf states and a strained relationship with Washington. Yet, that gamble appears to have paid off.

Still, if Türkiye is too assertive in Syria, it risks clashing with both Syrian nationalism and Israeli fears. For now, Ankara seems content to remain Syria's most influential neighbor without turning it into a protectorate. In April, speaking on the sidelines of a NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels, Foreign Minister Fidan said, "We don't want to see any confrontation with Israel in Syria because Syria belongs to Syrians."<sup>53</sup> This approach may prove sustainable. Israel's interests lie in southern Syria, Türkiye's in the north, and neither country — nor the new Syrian government — wants to see Iranian cells reestablished.

The greatest threat to Türkiye's future role in Syria may come from Sharaa and HTS itself. Can Sharaa rein in the more extreme factions under his umbrella, and does he even want to? His government oversaw the massacre of 1,500 Alawis back in March.<sup>54</sup> The violence has since stopped, but tensions remain. Could an isolated Alawi uprising, an Iranian cell, or extremist Sunni spoilers reignite conflict?

The new government must also convince Druzes, Kurds, Alawis, and Christians that they have a stake in Syria's future. Can Sharaa survive politically — or even physically? Can his administration turn the momentum of regional reintegration and sanctions relief into economic recovery? While the details of the new Syrian government fall outside the scope of this brief, its durability will shape the strategic calculus of all regional actors. These remain open questions. Sharaa's government has so far benefited from

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<sup>53</sup> Samia Nakhoul, "Exclusive: Turkey Wants No Confrontation with Israel in Syria, Foreign Minister Says," Reuters, April 4, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-wants-no-confrontation-with-israel-syria-foreign-minister-says-2025-04-04>.

<sup>54</sup> Maggie Michael, "Syrian Forces Massacred 1,500 Alawites. The Chain of Command Led to Damascus," Reuters, June 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/syrian-forces-massacred-1500-alawites-chain-command-led-damascus-2025-06-30>.



widespread relief over the fall of Assad. But that euphoria will fade. If the new government fails to deliver, it too may face serious resistance.

## Finding future common ground

Both the United States and Türkiye share an interest in a stable Syria. A weak state radiating violence would certainly threaten Turkish security, as an uptick in ISIS's infiltration in the country already suggests. It would also threaten the U.S. investment in Iraq, which only now appears to be paying off, and could trigger diplomatic and possibly military clashes between Israel and Türkiye. The United States and Türkiye both have an interest in resolving the status of Kurds within Syria. Turkish objectives have been clear and consistent over time, geared to the suppression of Kurdish bids for autonomy within Syria. Ankara's anxiety on this score might have been alleviated, at least to a degree, by the PKK's unilateral decision to lay down its arms and Syrian Kurdish negotiations with the transitional government in Damascus.<sup>55</sup> Just how reassuring the latter development proves to be, given that the deal struck reflects a power asymmetry between Damascus and the SDF that favors the Kurds, is open to question. But it does hint at Kurdish acknowledgement of a relationship to the Syrian state.

U.S. objectives have been less clear-cut. U.S. troop deployments within Syria are closely intertwined with the security of Syrian Kurds vis-à-vis a predatory Turkish neighbor. Türkiye has been prepared to risk a confrontation with the United States, as evidenced by artillery strikes against bases in Syria where U.S. troops and SDF personnel are colocated and by engagement with Kurdish forces directly and through proxy militias.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Daren Butler and Ece Toksabay, "Kurdish PKK Ends 40-Year Turkey Insurgency, Bringing Hope of Regional Stability," Reuters, May 12, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurdish-pkk-dissolves-after-decades-struggle-with-turkey-news-agency-close-2025-05-12>; Jaidaa Taha and Menna AlaaEIDin, "Syria's Interim President Signs Deal with Kurdish-Led SDF to Merge Forces," Reuters, March 11, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-reaches-deal-integrate-sdf-within-state-institutions-presidency-says-2025-03-10>.

<sup>56</sup> "U.S. Forces Say Turkey Was Deliberately 'Bracketing' American Troops with Artillery Fire in Syria," *Washington Post*, Oct. 12, 2019,

But the presence of U.S. troops has made a decisive Turkish onslaught unfeasible. This presence, however, has not been guaranteed in recent years. The first Trump administration was supposed to have drawn down U.S. forces in Syria, but a recalcitrant Pentagon and inattentive White House ensured that no troops actually departed.

The Biden administration favored continuing the U.S. presence on the grounds that withdrawing would precipitate an ISIS resurgence. By President Joe Biden's last year in office, U.S. troop levels had gone from 900 to about 2,000, more or less doubling.<sup>57</sup> The second Trump administration's approach was laid out in a Dec. 2024 Truth Social post by Trump, then still president-elect, to the effect that Syria was not a U.S. fight and American forces would be removed quickly.<sup>58</sup> Presumably, this would have ingratiated the incoming Trump administration with Erdoğan insofar as it would remove a tripwire deterrent to a Turkish assault on the SDF. In that regard, it would align with Trump's strong interest in a tight relationship with his counterpart in Ankara. As of June 2025, there were signs that Trump was moving in Türkiye's direction. The common ground would appear to consist of a redeployment of U.S. troops from Hasaka, Dayr al-Zawr, and the northeast to the tri-border crossing in the southeast at al-Tanf. This would afford freedom of maneuver for Türkiye in the Kurdish areas of northeast Syria while enabling the United States to monitor Iran's land corridor from Iraq to western Syria. Thus, one patch of common ground seems to be coming together.

The other patch, reducing the probability of increased tensions or even armed confrontation between Israel and Türkiye, remains to be sorted out. There might not be much the United States can do. President Trump can — but may choose not to — disregard Israeli preferences with respect to negotiations with Iran and Ansar Allah,

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/10/12/us-forces-say-turkey-was-deliberately-bracketing-american-forces-with-artillery-fire-syria>.

<sup>57</sup> Matthew Olay, "DOD Announces 2,000 Troops in Syria, Department Prepared for Government Shutdown," U.S. Department of Defense, Dec. 19, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4013726>.

<sup>58</sup> Ashleigh Fields, "Trump on Syria Conflict: 'This Is Not Our Fight'," *The Hill*, Dec. 7, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/5028048-trump-on-syria-conflict-this-is-not-our-fight>.

widely known as the Houthis, given his control of congressional Republicans and the debilitated state of the Democratic opposition. However, he may lack the ability to compel the current Israeli government to adjust its regional security strategy in ways that the United States might prefer.

For the time being, Israel is content with its current posture in Lebanon and Syria, which augmented its otherwise meager strategic depth at relatively low cost. With Israel holding sway in the territorial triangle with its apex south of Damascus down to its base — from Mt. Hermon to the Sea of Galilee — and able to intervene effectively to protect Druze towns in Syria's Suwayda Governorate, the Israel Defense Forces are in a position to interdict aggressive Sunni jihadist groups as well as Iranian forays funneling arms to dissident Alawis. As things stand now, Türkiye does not seem all that interested in Suwayda and probably feels unthreatened by Israel's current sphere of influence in Syria. In terms of ground, Türkiye's interest lies in the buffer zone between the Syrian border and the M4 Highway and Aleppo. Hence, Ankara is willing to parley with Israel about their respective interests there. Nonetheless, if frictions increase owing to events in Gaza or if the scope of Türkiye or Israel's spatial interest in Syria enlarges, the United States might find it necessary to mediate between these two rivals. Its willingness and ability to do so effectively would carve out another patch of common ground.

## Conclusion

Despite being NATO allies, the United States and Türkiye lack deep cultural, historical, or people-to-people ties. Their relationship is shaped by strategic and transactional considerations. In this realm, major barriers to cooperation have been removed. The death of Fethullah Gülen in Oct. 2024, the ongoing U.S. withdrawal from northeast Syria, and the pledged dissolution of the PKK have, by Türkiye's own assessment, removed important national security threats. This shift has coincided with the departure of some

vocal, critical members of Congress. The collapse of the Assad regime, however, carries ambiguous implications for Turkish interests.

The United States' interests in its relationship with Türkiye in the Middle East are clear, even if they are not vital. From a strategic perspective, maintaining a workable relationship with Türkiye is essential for the United States to balance continued support for its Kurdish partners against Turkish anxieties about Kurdish aspirations for independence. A sound bilateral relationship allows Washington to manage Turkish concerns, de-escalate tensions, and promote Kurdish integration into a unified Syrian state and, in Iraq's case, a functioning federal system. Preventing another wave of Syrian migration into Türkiye is also important, as it risks destabilizing not only the country itself but also European allies. Preventing open conflict between Türkiye and Israel in Syria also remains a key interest. Spiraling, potentially violent tensions between informal and formal allies would be a dangerous distraction from other diplomatic challenges, even as it presaged wider clashes and the disintegration of Syria.

Most of these goals can be advanced by recognizing that Turkish leaders view northern Iraq and Syria as vital to their country's national security, clearly communicating U.S. redlines, and prioritizing areas of cooperation, such as counter-ISIS efforts in post-Assad Syria and Iraq.<sup>59</sup> Specific recommendations include:

- **Institutionalize a Syria Coordination Mechanism with Türkiye**
  - Appointing U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye Thomas Barrack as special envoy to Syria was a key step toward acknowledging Türkiye's role in Syria's future and improving policy coordination. To build on this, the United States should establish a formal working group with Türkiye on Syria — bringing together intelligence, military, diplomatic, and economic channels. This would help repair strained ties, including those between

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<sup>59</sup> Interviews with Turkish officials revealed frustration with elongated talks that do not translate into agreement or action.

Ankara and U.S. Central Command, which operates in areas of Turkish concern. Quietly supporting backchannel diplomacy between Turkish officials and SDF representatives should also continue.

- **Rebuild Strategic Trust through Targeted Defense Cooperation**

- To re-anchor the alliance in mutual security goals, the United States should:
  - resume limited arms sales or technology transfers, contingent on Turkish cooperation in Syria and Iraq;
  - expand U.S.–Türkiye joint training and NATO exercises, particularly those focused on counterterrorism.

- **Support Turkish–Israeli Stabilization Dialogue**

- Facilitate Turkish–Israeli coordination on major issues, including deconfliction within Syria and eastern Mediterranean energy development.
- Recognize that harsh rhetoric deployed by Israel and Türkiye toward one another is often political but does not preclude practical cooperation.



## APPENDIX

Period	NATO Context	Syria and Iraq Context	Compartmentalized?
2013–2014	<p><b>Strained Alliance:</b> After Türkiye's 2013 Gezi Park protests, the U.S. was worried about democratic backsliding; Obama became more distant after Erdoğan's harsh response to dissent.</p> <p><b>Early ISIS:</b> NATO unity was tested by the rise of ISIS in 2014. Türkiye (as a frontline NATO member) was initially hesitant to join the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, prioritizing the ouster of Assad and cautious about empowering Syrian Kurds.</p>	<p><b>Syrian Civil War:</b> Türkiye backed Syrian rebels against Assad, while the U.S. shifted its focus to ISIS by late 2014. As ISIS besieged Kobane in 2014–15, the U.S. began partnering with the YPG to push ISIS back, angering Türkiye. The U.S. distinguished the YPG from the PKK, but Türkiye viewed them equivalently as terrorist threats.</p> <p><b>Iraq Coordination:</b> Both the U.S. and Türkiye opposed ISIS's spread in Iraq; however, Türkiye was reluctant to commit troops and focused on ousting Assad.</p>	<p><b>Yes</b></p> <p>Separate tracks despite policy divergence.</p>
2015–2016	<p><b>Renewed Issues:</b> In 2015, Türkiye's peace process with the PKK collapsed; Ankara grew critical of U.S. support for Syrian Kurds. Anti-U.S. sentiment rose within Türkiye's establishment, hurting trust in NATO channels.</p> <p><b>Russia and Coup Attempt Fallout:</b> After Türkiye shot down a Russian jet in Nov. 2015, NATO allies upheld Türkiye's right to defend its airspace but urged de-escalation to avoid a broader conflict. The <b>July 2016 coup attempt</b> in Türkiye then brought relations to a low point – Ankara blamed Fethullah Gülen (living in the U.S.) and felt there was a lack of Western support. Purges in the aftermath and Erdoğan's increased power alarmed NATO partners over Türkiye's democratic backsliding.</p>	<p><b>Counter-ISIS Cooperation:</b> Türkiye agreed to let the U.S. use Incirlik Air Base for strikes against ISIS; at the same time, the U.S. expanded support to the YPG-led forces fighting ISIS, deepening Turkish fears. Türkiye warned that it considered the YPG <b>as dangerous as ISIS</b>.</p> <p><b>Cross-Border Operations:</b> In Aug. 2016, after the coup attempt, Türkiye launched <b>Operation Euphrates Shield</b> in northern Syria, targeting ISIS and preventing the YPG from making a continuous enclave. The U.S. provided support against ISIS but worked to prevent clashes between Turkish forces and U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters; in Iraq, Türkiye maintained troops near Mosul, causing friction with Baghdad and the U.S., though both the U.S. and Türkiye supported Iraq's fight to retake Mosul from ISIS.</p>	<p><b>Mostly</b></p> <p>Post-coup attempt mistrust, but Syria issues didn't hurt NATO cooperation.</p>
2017	<p><b>S-400 Deal:</b> Türkiye signaled a shift by finalizing a purchase of Russia's S-400 air-defense system, signed in Dec. 2017. NATO feared the system could compromise allied air capabilities. The U.S. warned of consequences, setting the stage for Türkiye's eventual removal from advanced NATO weapons programs.</p>	<p><b>Clashing Strategies in Syria:</b> The U.S. chose to directly arm and assist the <b>YPG-led SDF</b> for major offensives over Turkish objections. Türkiye was shocked that its ally would empower a group it saw as the PKK; U.S. officials initially downplayed YPG-PKK ties, framing support as "temporary and tactical," but this did little to assuage Türkiye.</p> <p><b>Regional Alignments:</b> Türkiye worked with Russia and Iran on Syria's future at the Astana talks,</p>	<p><b>Partially</b></p> <p>Spillover from Syria tensions into NATO, but deconfliction efforts.</p>

	<p><b>Democracy Concerns:</b> An April 2017 referendum expanded President Erdoğan’s powers, prompting Western criticism; NATO members grew more vocal about Türkiye’s authoritarian drift, even as strategic cooperation continued.</p>	<p>marginalizing U.S. influence; Türkiye and the U.S. did find common ground in opposing the Kurdish independence referendum in northern Iraq.</p>	
2018	<p><b>Sanctions:</b> U.S.–Türkiye relations became rocky as Türkiye detained American citizens; the U.S. responded with targeted sanctions, contributing to a Turkish currency crisis, underscoring growing political mistrust.</p> <p><b>S-400 Standoff:</b> Despite warnings from the U.S. and NATO, Türkiye continued toward deploying the S-400. In June, the U.S. Congress moved to block delivery of F-35 jets to Türkiye unless it abandoned the Russian deal. NATO officials worried about interoperability and intelligence risks, as Türkiye seemed willing to defy alliance consensus for its own defense choices.</p>	<p><b>Türkiye Targets the YPG:</b> Türkiye launched <b>Operation Olive Branch</b> to capture the Afrin region from the YPG; this brought Türkiye into conflict with the U.S.–allied Kurdish faction. NATO allies expressed concern that the offensive diverted resources from the anti–ISIS fight.</p> <p><b>Avoiding U.S.–Türkiye Clash:</b> To prevent escalation, Washington and Ankara negotiated a “Manbij Roadmap”: YPG units withdrew from the city of Manbij, and U.S.–Turkish forces conducted joint patrols, keeping NATO partnership intact even as they disagreed in Syria. Late in the year, President Trump announced a Syria pullout; Türkiye welcomed the prospect of YPG withdrawal, but coordination with the U.S. remained fraught.</p>	<p><b>Yes</b></p> <p>Syria tensions high, but NATO alliance remained distinct.</p>
2019	<p><b>S-400 Delivered, NATO Fallout:</b> In July, Türkiye received its first S-400 units from Russia. Then, the U.S. <b>removed Türkiye from the F-35 stealth fighter program</b>. Washington warned that the S-400 undermined NATO’s integrated defense, an unprecedented penalizing of a NATO member for procurement choices. The U.S. later also froze arms sales and, by 2020, imposed sanctions via the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA.</p> <p><b>Alliance Strains:</b> Türkiye’s alignment with Russia and its own nationalist course fueled talk of a “strategic divorce” with the West. Tensions flared with NATO members Greece and France over disputes in the eastern Mediterranean. NATO’s unity was tested; Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg worked to keep Türkiye engaged within the alliance.</p>	<p><b>Military Showdown in Syria:</b> In Oct., after a U.S. troop pullback, Türkiye launched <b>Operation Peace Spring</b> into Syria, attacking the U.S.–backed SDF. Apex of U.S.–Turkish discord in Syria: Türkiye cast the offensive as countering terrorism, the U.S. decried it as a betrayal of the fight against ISIS; several NATO countries suspended arms sales to Türkiye and U.S. leaders threatened heavy sanctions; Trump briefly sanctioned Turkish officials and levied tariffs against the country.</p> <p><b>Linked Domains:</b> The Syria clash spilled into NATO dynamics. Türkiye demanded NATO solidarity against the YPG, at one point <b>holding up NATO defense plans</b> for the Baltic states to press allies to label the YPG terrorists. Demonstrated how a Syria–related rift caused simultaneous dysfunction; trust in both domains plummeted.</p>	<p><b>No</b></p> <p>Syria crisis directly disrupted NATO planning; lowest point in compartmentalizing.</p>
2020	<p><b>Contentious NATO Engagement:</b> Türkiye <b>blocked a NATO defense plan</b> for Poland and the Baltic states until it got more support</p>	<p><b>Idlib Crisis:</b> In Feb., Russian–backed Syrian regime forces killed dozens of Turkish troops in Idlib. The U.S. publicly supported Türkiye’s “right to</p>	<p><b>Yes</b></p>

	<p>against the YPG; eventually it gave in under allied pressure. Turkish moves against Greece and Cyprus in the context of energy drilling disputes led to a maritime standoff; NATO had to set up a deconfliction mechanism between member states.</p> <p><b>Sanctions:</b> In Dec., the U.S. imposed CAATSA sanctions — the first-ever U.S. sanctions on a NATO ally. Reports circulated that the U.S. was diversifying military basing as a hedge against instability in Washington–Ankara ties, but Türkiye remained an active NATO contributor.</p>	<p>self-defense” and stepped up diplomatic backing for Ankara’s position against Moscow. NATO did not intervene militarily but showed U.S.–Türkiye alignment when Turkish forces confronted common adversaries (i.e., Assad and Russia).</p> <p><b>Countering ISIS and the PKK:</b> The ISIS caliphate was eliminated, but U.S. troops stayed in Syria alongside the SDF; Türkiye saw the U.S. and YPG allying as prolonging its security threat and continued cross-border strikes against the PKK in Iraq and Syria. U.S. forces avoided involvement in Türkiye–PKK hostilities and <b>deconfliction mechanisms</b> kept operations separate.</p>	<p>Severe issues managed in parallel.</p>
2021	<p><b>Recalibration under Biden:</b> The new Biden administration took a more values-based tone with Türkiye; in April, Biden recognized the <b>Armenian Genocide</b>, a step his predecessors avoided due to Turkish objections. Türkiye condemned the move but refrained from retaliation beyond rhetoric.</p> <p><b>NATO Engagement and Conditions:</b> Through the year, the U.S. emphasized that Türkiye must resolve the S-400 issue; President Erdoğan offered concessions (e.g., a “<b>strategic mechanism</b>” dialogue), and volunteered Turkish forces to guard Kabul’s airport after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan; <b>CAATSA sanctions</b> remained, and Congress seemed to signal any major arms sales would require better behavior.</p>	<p><b>Standoff without Offensive:</b> There were no new Turkish incursions in Syria, maintaining a relative calm. U.S. support for the SDF (now focused on counter–ISIS raids and holding prison camps) continued to annoy Türkiye; Ankara periodically threatened to launch another operation against YPG–held towns like Manbij and Tall Rif at.</p> <p><b>Enduring Mistrust:</b> Early in the year, Türkiye accused the U.S. of enabling PKK terrorism after a Turkish operation to rescue hostages in Iraq ended poorly. The U.S. statement, condemning the PKK if reports of executions were confirmed, angered Türkiye. U.S. and Turkish forces in Syria continued coordination and remained committed to preventing an ISIS resurgence.</p>	<p><b>Yes</b></p> <p>NATO reset occurs despite Syria mistrust.</p>
2022	<p><b>Ukraine War:</b> Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Feb. put Türkiye in the spotlight; as a NATO member, Türkiye supported Ukraine with drones and upheld the Montreux Convention to block Russian warships from transiting to the Black Sea. But Türkiye did not join Western sanctions on Russia, reflecting its economic ties and “balanced” stance.</p> <p><b>NATO Dispute:</b> In May, Finland and Sweden applied to join NATO, but Türkiye <b>vetoed</b> the start of accession talks. Erdogan accused the two states of harboring exiled PKK members</p>	<p><b>No New Invasion:</b> Türkiye signaled possible new offensives in Syria, especially after claiming the U.S.–backed SDF was behind several incidents. In the middle of the year, President Erdoğan threatened ground operations into Kurdish–held areas, but both the U.S. and Russia cautioned against it. Instead, Türkiye confined itself to escalated airstrikes and artillery across northern Syria.</p> <p><b>Iraq Operations:</b> Türkiye expanded Operation Claw against PKK enclaves in Iraqi Kurdistan. The U.S. remained largely hands-off on these strikes,</p>	<p><b>Yes</b></p> <p>Compartmentalization restored post–Ukraine invasion despite Syria bombing threats.</p>

	and demanded policy changes. Sweden and Finland pledged to address Turkish terrorism concerns (including <b>not supporting the YPG</b> militia), and Türkiye lifted its veto but reserved the right to monitor their compliance.	focusing instead on continuing intelligence cooperation with Türkiye against ISIS cells. Syria and Iraq saw <b>managed tension</b> : Türkiye's military moves were frequent, but an understanding endured, whereby the U.S. and Türkiye avoided direct confrontation.	
2023	<p><b>Bargains:</b> Some positive movement emerged. Türkiye approved Finland and Sweden's NATO membership. Türkiye expected benefits: the Biden administration indicated support for a \$20 billion sale of F-16 fighters and upgrades to Türkiye once it greenlit NATO expansion.</p> <p><b>Enduring Issues:</b> The U.S. remained skeptical of Türkiye's ties with Russia; Türkiye was frustrated with what it saw as Western double standards. But Türkiye's late-2023 ratification of Sweden's NATO bid and coordination with allies on Ukraine policy suggested a period of <b>reengagement</b>. The NATO summit in Vilnius even saw Erdoğan in high-level meetings with Biden.</p>	<p><b>Flare-up:</b> In Oct., U.S.–Turkish tension in Syria spiked to an unprecedented level: Türkiye launched anti–PKK airstrikes in Syria that came <b>close to U.S. troops</b>, prompting a U.S. F-16 to <b>shoot down a Turkish drone</b>, raising fears of confrontation. High-level calls affirmed it was unintentional and that cooperation must continue.</p> <p><b>Countering ISIS Continues:</b> The U.S. and SDF kept pressure on ISIS remnants, while Türkiye struck PKK/YPG targets — effectively operating in parallel. Türkiye and the U.S. largely “agreed to disagree” in northern Syria, coordinating to avoid accidents. Turkish officials also explored rapprochement with the Assad regime, which the U.S. viewed skeptically.</p>	<p><b>Yes</b></p> <p>Direct military incident avoided escalation; domains stabilized in parallel.</p>

- In most years, **compartmentalization was achieved**, with tensions in Syria and Iraq not fully disrupting NATO relations.
- The exception was **2019** (and the years leading up to it), when Türkiye's incursion into Syria and NATO veto threats led to **direct spillover**, breaking down the separation between arenas.
- Otherwise, the U.S. and Türkiye have generally shown a consistent ability to **disagree intensely in one domain while cooperating or managing in the other**.

## About the authors

**Adam Weinstein** is deputy director of the Middle East program at the Quincy Institute, whose current research focuses on security and rule of law in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. He is also a non-resident fellow at Tadblab, a think tank and advisory firm based in Islamabad, and regularly travels throughout Pakistan. Adam's analysis has been featured in the *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *War on the Rocks*, *Lawfare*, and *The National Interest*.

Before coming to the Quincy Institute, he worked for KPMG's international trade practice and assisted multinational clients in navigating Asia's changing trade landscape, incorporating human rights due diligence into supply chains, managing sanctions risk, and utilizing free trade agreements. He also worked as a senior law and policy analyst at the National Iranian American Council where he focused on the securitization of U.S. immigration policy and its effect on immigrant communities.

Adam received a J.D. from the Temple University Beasley School of Law with a concentration in international law and transitional justice. He served as a U.S. Marine and deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 as part of a detachment to the 2nd Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company where he served in Uruzgan Province in support of Australia's 2nd Commando Regiment.

**Steven Simon** is a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute and a distinguished fellow and visiting professor at Dartmouth College. He served as the National Security Council senior director for counterterrorism in the Clinton White House and for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama White House, and in senior positions at the U.S. Department of State. Outside of government, he was a principal and senior advisor to Good Harbor LLC in Abu Dhabi and director of the Middle East office of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS, in Manama. Prior to this, he was deputy director of IISS in London. He managed security-related projects at the RAND

Corporation and was the Hasib Sabbagh Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Steve has taught at Princeton, Dartmouth, Colby, and Amherst and held fellowships at Brown, Oxford, and the American Academy in Berlin.

He is the co-author of *The Age of Sacred Terror* (Random House, 2004), winner of the Arthur C. Ross Award for best book in international relations, and of *The Next Attack* (Henry Holt, 2006), a finalist for the Lionel Gelber Prize, and one of the “best books of the year” in the *Washington Post* and *Financial Times*, which focused on the U.S. response to 9/11. He also co-authored *Iraq at the Crossroads: State and Society in the Shadow of Regime Change* (Oxford, 2003); *Building a Successful Palestinian State* (RAND, 2007); *The Arc: A Formal Structure for a Palestinian State* (RAND, 2005); *The Sixth Crisis* (Oxford, 2010); *The Pragmatic Superpower: The United States and the Middle East in the Cold War* (W.W. Norton, 2016); *Our Separate Ways* (Public Affairs, 2016); and *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East* (Penguin/Random House, 2023).

Steve has published in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico*, *New York Review of Books*, *Survival*, and *Haaretz*, and has appeared on PBS NewsHour, CNN, and Al Jazeera.



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2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
7th floor  
Washington, DC 20006

+1 202-800-4662  
[info@quincyinst.org](mailto:info@quincyinst.org)  
[www.quincyinst.org](http://www.quincyinst.org)