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QI Panel:

Power Plays: U.S.-Turkey Relations Under Trump

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12:00-1:00 PM ET

Adam Weinstein 1:05

Okay, welcome to today's panel, which is power plays us, Turkey relations under Trump or Trump 2.0 we should say. And it's hosted by the Quincy Institute. And if you're not familiar with the Quincy Institute, it's a Washington, DC based think tank that promotes a restraint oriented foreign policy that's more rooted in diplomacy and less in military intervention and primacy abroad.

And today we really have an all star lineup to talk about us, Turkey relations in the Middle East under Trump 2.0 My name is Adam Weinstein. I'm the Deputy Director of the Middle East program. Here, we're joined by our own Steve Simon, who's a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute and a Distinguished Fellow and visiting professor at Dartmouth College. And from 2011 to 2012 he served on the National Security Council staff as Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs. He also served, worked on the National Security Council staff from 1994 to 1999 on counter terrorism and Middle East. And that was during the Clinton administration, of course. And his most recent book, Grand Delusion, The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East, was published last year. We also have Kadir Ustun, who is the Executive Director of the SETA foundation in Washington, DC. He holds a PhD in Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies from Columbia, and an MA in history from Bill Kent University. His work has been published inside, inside Turkey, Al Jazeera, English Cairo, review of Global Affairs, all monitor, Politico, Middle East eye, Middle East policy and many other outlets. And he's actually joining us from Ankara today. Next we have Gönül Tol, and she is the founding director of the Middle East Institute's Turkey program and senior fellow with the Black Sea program. And she is the author of "Erdogan's War a Strongman Struggle at Home and in Syria" And she's taught at George Washington University and the National Defense University, and she holds a PhD from FIU down in Miami. And then, last but not least, we are joined by Colonel (Retired) Rich Outzen, who is a non resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Turkey and a geopolitical analyst. He also has his own private clients through Dragoman LLC, which is a consulting firm, and from 2016 to 2021 he served as a military and senior sorry military and civilian advisor at the US Department of State, working at the policy planning office and the office of the Special Representative for Syria. And he's also spent many years in various embassies, including in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Iraq, Afghanistan and so forth. And he is probably one of the the premier expert on and on the SDF and what's going on in northeastern Syria. So I'm grateful for all of you to join us today. I'm going to go right into the questions here, because actually I had planned this panel before HTS entered Damascus and Assad left, and so this is actually really interesting timing to be having this kind of panel. And I want to start with you, gunnel, perhaps you could give us some background on what's happened over the last

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decade. I mean, how did we go from Ahmed Davido's idea of no problem with neighbors to Erdogan's support for some of the revolutions in the Arab Spring and his desire to change Syria to what we have today.

Gönül Tol 4:53

Thanks Adam for the invitation and putting together this excellent panel. Yes, I. I've long argued that in order to understand what Turkey is doing on the foreign policy front in general, but Syria in particular, one must really look at domestic dynamics and Erdogan's plans to consolidate his rule. And Syria in particular has played a very special role, it's occupied a unique place in Erdogan's domestic calculations. And the reason is, Turkey shares a long border with Syria. That's number one and second. Because of that border, you have communities in different groups who have long shared a cultural and historical tie on both sides of the border, and that's one of the reasons why, particularly with the Kurdish communities living in Syria and the Assad regime's previous policy of hosting the PKK, whatever happened in Syria was always very important for Turkey domestically, even before Erdogan's rise to power, before Erdogan won the elections in 2002 Turkish military always considered Syria a very important place that it had this almost priority on Turkey's foreign policy direction, mainly because the Assad regime gave sanctuary to the PKK leadership at the time. So when the military, Turkish military, looked at Syria, it saw a particularly complicated neighbor, and that's why, using Syria and the PKK influence there, military basically justified and legitimized its oversized role in politics. So Erdogan came to power, and he saw Turkey's relationship with Syria as an important tool in his efforts to sideline opponents and centralized power.

So even before the Syrian uprising started in 2011 Syria played an important role what he wanted to do. Erdogan always wanted to sideline the military, the secularist military, and having zero problems with neighbors, a country that the military, the secularist establishment, considered as a red line. Uh, developing zero problems with neighbors became very important in Erdogan's efforts to sideline the secularist military, right? So that's why Ahmed's zero problems with neighbors came in very handy. Um, and Erdogan did cultivate very close ties with the Assad regime, but once Erdogan centralized power by 2011 that domestic strategy shifted, Erdogan set his eyes on a new goal, and that was grabbing more power through switching to a presidential, executive presidency. And for that, he wanted to engage the country's conservative segments, Turkish and Kurdish segments of the population. And he launched a Kurdish opening, and he engaged in a more Islamist agenda, and I'm happy to unpack that, because it's not an Iran style Islamist agenda, but it was an Islamist agenda at home. And the uprisings in the region and in Syria came at a perfect point, a moment when Erdogan was trying to burnish his Islam credentials at home, so by throwing Turkey support behind the Islamists trying to topple regional autocrats and Assad in particular, that really helped Erdogan's efforts at home to delegitimize his secularist opponents further, particularly the main opposition party, the CHP.

So from 2011 to 2015 Erdogan's number one goal, number one goal was to topple a regime which he called a godless secular regime, and that was very much in line with what he was trying to do at home. And oftentimes he likened his secularist opponents at home to the Assad regime. And

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I remember the AKP officials after the uprisings in Syria started, they said that the Syrians were getting rid of their own CHP. So whatever happened in Syria played an important role. So until 2015 Erdogan's Islamist agenda at home, I think, became the main driver of Turkey's Syria policy. Turkey's efforts to topple the regime and backing the Islamist op. Goes to that regime. But when Erdogan's strategy to rely on Islamist and the Kurds to grab more power failed, he switched to a different strategy, from 2015 onwards, and the developments in Syria played a role in complicating Erdogan's efforts.

Because starting from 2014 you see Assad regime giving a green light to an autonomous Kurdish region in the north. And then you see Americans arming the YPG, a terrorist organization, and that really emboldened Turkey's own Kurds, who were in negotiations with the Turkish Government, and that led to the historic Rise of the pro Kurdish party in 2015 elections, and that victory denied Erdogan the Presidential the parliamentary majority for his ruling party. So developments in Syria also come. So you can see that dialectical relationship between Turkey's domestic developments and whatever was happening in Syria had a direct impact Erdogan's policies were affected by what was happening in Syria, and Erdogan himself had a huge impact on domestic dynamics in Syria. Right? So when Erdogan's strategy failed. He switched to a different strategy, and he aligned himself with the Turkish nationalist in 2015 so from then on, that domestic strategy translated into a very anti Kurdish strategy at home and in Syria. And I know my colleagues here will correct me saying that it was not anti Kurdish, it was anti PKK. In Syria, I agree with that. But in Turkey, Erdogan also clamped down on legitimate, legitimate Turkish Kurdish political movement, right? So then came toppling the regime was not a priority for Erdogan anymore.

From 2015 what was more important for him was curbing Kurdish influence in northern Iraq. And for that goal, Erdogan almost with the Astana process, almost allied himself with the Assad regime, in the sense that the Astana process really locked in regime's military gains on the ground, and Erdogan managed to thanks to the nationalist Alliance, Erdogan managed to get what he wanted, which was an executive presidency. Um, but in 2019 another turning point came, and that was Erdogan's Party lost in municipal elections, and that was a big, big deal, a big blow to the ruling party. So Erdogan recalibrated his policy. And the reason why Erdogan's Party lost in 2019, elections, there were several reasons, but one of the top reasons was the presence of millions of Syrian refugees in the country, and the nationalist backlash against that. So from then on, Erdogan wanted to mend ties with the Assad regime, in the hopes that mending ties would allow him to send the Syrian refugees back to Syria, and he again changed his Syria policy accordingly. And until then, he has been trying to normalize relations with the Assad regime, but Assad has been dragging his feet, and he came to the negotiation he had all these maximalist demands, and it's finally Erdogan decided, I think, after the last Astana Summit, that this was not going to happen. And I think that's when Ankara gave the green light to the latest offensive that ended up toppling the regime. And here we are. I'm sorry that was it too long.

Adam Weinstein 14:01

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No, no, it wasn't. I think, I mean, there's a lot to know to make the conversation more fruitful. I think that added good context. And, you know, I think a lot of folks who casually are observing this in the US sometimes think that Turkey was just engaged in the Syrian war as some sort of Master of proxies. But it was, in fact, a hot war for Turkey in many ways. 36 Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib by a joint Russian Syrian strike in 2020, others were killed by ISIS. And of course, Turkey felt the ramifications of the war at home, with the millions of refugees and the distortionary effect that had on domestic politics at home. But as this was happening in northwestern Syria, there were also things happening in northeastern Syria,

And for that, I want to bring in Rich and Rich, you wrote a great article called in all azimuth, called costly incrementalism. US PKK policy and relations with Turkey, and I'm going to read a short passage from that article and then ask you a question about it, because a lot of folks in DC, I don't think, at least not they don't emotionally understand how Turkey views the PKK and how they view the YPG, and the fact that in the popular Turkish imagination, and even among policy makers, it is as if we are working with their al Qaeda, or if they were working with al Qaeda against us. And that is really how many of them view it. And you conducted some interviews, and for obvious reasons, some of them are off the record, but I'm going to read an excerpt from one from that article you wrote in Al azimuth, and it's a it's the question being asked is on whether there is a substantive difference between the YPG, PYD and broader PKK. The Turkish respondent says the facts say otherwise. Of course, there was a time when Turkey itself had engaged the PYD, but that doesn't change the fact that they both, the PYD and YPG are affiliated with the PKK, that slogan temporary, tactical, transactional, never resonated with Ankara and is so stale that it adds insult to injury. It was a bad excuse for a selfish US decision to make an exception in the fight against terrorism at Turkey's expense. And of course, what that person is saying is to fight ISIS the United the CENTCOM was willing to partner with the SDF, which is just in a sense, but from the Turkish perspective, a shell group that is really just part and parcel of the PKK, which is, of course, a terrorist group, a designated terrorist, terrorist group by both the US and Turkey that that has killed many civilians in Turkey and Many security personnel in Turkey. So maybe you can talk about how, or inform us about how Turkey views the SDF, and also that history of relations between us and Turkey on the Kurdish issue, maybe even going back to the first Gulf War, right?

Colonel Rich Outzen 16:54

Well, thanks for the invitation, Adam. It's good to be in such distinguished company with the other panelists. There's, of course, history of the PKK goes back to the 70s, a time of great turmoil and ferment in Turkey, when they're sort of on the cusp of civil war, really. In the late 70s, between left and right, there were street battles between nationalists and leftists. One of the streams of leftism that came out of that era was the PKK, which was focused on the cause of ethnic Kurds in Turkey, who, at the time were prevented from receiving education in their in their mother tongue for the coronaphone Kurds, many of them are actually turcophone. But anyway, there was many legitimate grievances that the system was not dealing with. So there was a revolutionary movement started, and that became an armed movement in 1984 with attacks in Eru and Shin dinli and the especially during the early years, the PKK activities were

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unabashedly terrorists. They were killing local conservative and religious leaders. They were fighting against tribes that were aligned with the state, as opposed to with the leftist ideology. And it bears stating here that many Kurds in Turkey are more conservative, they're religious, they're tribal, and it didn't resonate with them. So the PKK phenomenon took on in these early years of the 80s and the 90s, something of the character of an intra Kurdish Civil War as well. Most of the people who died, you'll hear the number 40,000 thrown out sometimes, were actually Kurds, and that's includes PKK. Kurds killed by security forces. Kurdish members of the security forces killed by the PKK.

And by the way, I think for a long time, the largest armed force of Kurds in the Middle East, that maybe the second largest now was actually the village guards who work for the government of Turkey, really, in an anti PKK role. Now, the PKK made a even though it was originally sponsored, they did their training in the Bucha valley in the 70s and 80s. They were trained by Russians. Russian intelligence was certainly was providing support to them. They made a strategic decision not to go after US interests. We had US service members killed in the 80s, and I think maybe even in the 90s in Turkey, but it was by dev soul and other extreme left groups, but not by the PKK. So in the early years, the US sort of took a yes, these guys are bad, but they're not our problem. Approach to the PKK that changed during the Clinton second term, because the Turks were, in geopolitical sense, critical to other things we were trying to do in the region. So that goes with the Balkans, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, also pushing for peace between Arabs and Israelis.

So the Clinton administration made a decision geopolitically. We needed to do what we could to get Turkey more on board, and that included listing the PKK as a foreign terror organization, which I believe was 9798 and actually providing practical assistance in the capture of abdullah in Kenya. Ojalon is really a great study in how intricately woven interwoven the Syria file and the PKK file are after he was fled Turkey in the 1980s, ojalon went to Damascus. He was hosted by Hafez Al Assad, Bashar, his father. The training camps, as I said, were in the Syrian controlled Bucha Valley in Lebanon in 1998 99 the Turkish military had had enough, after a series of particularly bloody attacks, and said, That's it. We're going to clear the mines between our two borders, and we were going to march to Damascus. Attila atesh, the commander of the Turkish Second Army directly threatened an invasion to go get ojalon, and Hafez Al Assad kicked him out. So he went on a tour. He went to Moscow. He went, reportedly, to Greece for a little while, ended up in Kenya, where he was captured by Turkish forces, with the assistance, reportedly, of US intelligence.

So after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 things changed again that created a lot of bad blood between the United States and Turkey, and whatever sympathy, residual sympathy for the sort of suppression of PKK terrorism had been in the United States dramatically changed as the security establishment in the United States started to see Turkey as a bigger problem regionally and less of a partner. This stayed at a certain level in 2000 until 2008 2009 in Obama's first term, there was a reconvergence of sorts, because both Obama and Erdogan were sort of on the same side initially, about the Syrian revolution, they both said, Assad must go. However, that changed again. There was another turning point in 2014 actually, late 2013 early 2014 with the

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metastasis of ISIS, they started killing Americans. They captured Mosul, captured large portions of northeast Syria, and the United States made a strategic decision at that point that we didn't want to send our own troops in, but we had to take care of the ISIS caliphate that was growing in northeast Syria, and whether by design or out of a little bit of ignorance, that the chosen tool for that was the YPG.

Now the YPG was simply the PKK Syrian arm up until about 2004 or so. I believe 2004 was the year they formally designated YPG as a separate group and PYD as a separate party. So for the rest of the PKK organization, their armed wing in Turkey and in Iraq is the HPG, the armed wing in Syria is the YPG, and the party is the PYD. And I think I've spoken with some military folks who were involved with the initial decision. It was not a strategic decision to partner with the PKK. It was a pragmatic decision to use the force that was most readily available, that would not require us boots on the ground to go after to go after ISIS, and in that role, even as you know, I'm very much not a supporter of the YPG or the PKK. I'm on ideological grounds and geopolitical grounds.

I don't like the partnership. But there is a rationale for why that partnership was pursued and it was advertised as temporary, transactional and so forth. But over time, what happens with military people when they are fighting, killing, dying together is there's a camaraderie, a camaraderie that grows. And so this is what social scientists might call a principal agent problem that at a certain point, especially as we got closer to the original goal, which was destruction of the physical caliphate, or territorial caliphate, there had developed a very real sympathy in Washington, in the Pentagon and CENTCOM down in Tampa, and to some extent in Congress, for this group. And people started referring to them, not as the YPG, but the Kurds. Now of course, Gönül will know this in QIR as well. But many of the founders of the AKP party are ethnic Kurds. Many of the supporters of the AKP, which is Erdogans party in Turkey, are Kurds. So it's not so simple as saying the Kurds are here and Erdogan going against them. It really was motivated by this problem, problematic linkage of the YPG, sort of organic linkage and the PKK mothership in condil, the mountains between Iraq and Iran. So at this point now, we're sort of on an inertial momentum track, right?

So this group that was critical to how we prosecuted the war on ISIS and earned, arguably, some goodwill from the United States in that has ceased to have its primary function. Now we, are we the proxy, or are they? Are the proxy? That's that's a reasonable question to ask, because especially now, with Assad gone and the prospects for a legitimate unified Syrian government, the idea that without a top level political decision, that we're going to support an independent or autonomous region there, or that we're going to endorse this radical left wing ideology represented by that group, we still have an instrumental linkage and relationship with them. So this has set off the Turks for a long, long time. And when we told them, Look, we need to do this to end the ISIS caliphate, the response we typically got back is, we don't like this, but tell us when it's going to end. And if you tell us when it's going to end, then there might be something we can work out in terms of a modus vivendi we've never said when it's going to end, and that remains the primary problem between the United States and Turkey in Syria. And with

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regards to the broader bilateral relationship, is uncertainty about the nature of this relationship with the PKK offshoot.

Adam Weinstein 24:55

Yeah, a quick follow up before we move to us Turkey relations broadly and bring in Kadir and Steven then. But you know, when you talk to first of all, to your point, actually, to your point about US military personnel forming a bond with the with the calling them the Kurds, you know, with the SDF. You know, I think that's even more pronounced because of the type of US military personnel doing these deployments. They're special forces. They're doing 567 deployments. They're really living with them. It's not like it's not like the partnership that a lot of US Marines had with the Afghan National Army, or that US soldiers had with the Iraqi army. It's a much closer relationship. It's a much more highly skilled and professionalized kind of US soldier who's going over there, and many of them are going to be career soldiers, so and they're going to rise up in the ranks, and they might have some influence at CENTCOM. So I think that's a factor as well. But when you talk to us officials, they do kind of give you, you know, they really do seem to believe, while there's a real distinction between the SDF, the YPG, the PKK, and it can sound a bit like a word salad. Is it a word salad? Or is there a real distinction, even though you don't agree with the partnership, is there, are there actual differences?

Colonel Rich Outzen 26:11

Well, there are theoretical differences, there are not real differences. And I think part of the challenge for us policy is to make those differences real. I mean, the reality is that many of the people in the SDF are not even Kurdish. They're Arabs. And remember the SDF as a construct was developed, but in 2015 2016 because the, I think it was Tony Thomas, the commander of us SOCOM at the time, said, Hey, look, you guys have an image problem. You need to rebrand and put the word democracy in there somewhere. He said as much at the Aspen Institute. So the fact that many of the leadership are indeed Syrians is that's that's a positive. But there are, and there always have been, what they call cadres, which is foreign, some Turkish speaking, some Arabic speaking, and some just Kurdish speaking, but non, non Syrian Kurds that have been part of the leadership of the SDF and made many of the key decisions. And those who have been to Syria also know that the dirty little secret is that while they're at the level of cantons or sort of the decentralized units within the autonomous administration, there is representation. You'll have an Arab, a Christian, and occurred on each of the local councils, there'll be a man and a woman. The key decisions continue to be made and the key appointments for personnel by Khan deal.

And the real question has been, if there ever was a process, a negotiating process, by which the Turks were willing to live with something there, how would you make sure that it was a truly, genuinely Syrian thing and not something that was ruled and controlled by condile? My view is that that is not a substantive difference at this point. And what Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan said earlier this week, I guess, over the weekend, is look for us to stop to seeing that as an enemy. You have to send all the foreign cadres home, and anybody, essentially the people with

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Turkish blood on their hands, senior YPG leadership, even if Syrians that have this PKK background, such as Muslim Abdi, who absolutely the military commander for a long time of the of the SDF, who has been involved. He got his combat skills fighting against Turks, right. So their position is that those people need to leave if there is a way to make this difference that theoretically exists between the Syrian franchise, SDF, YPG, PYD, and the rest of that movement, the regional PKK movement, it would have to involve dilution of the con deals, control of policy decisions and overall top lines, and also a weeding out of the foreign, non Syrian personnel in those areas. It's not impossible, but it certainly hasn't happened.

Adam Weinstein 28:37

Okay, thanks for that. We're going to zoom out a little bit. And this next question goes to both Kadir and Steven. We'll start with Steven, and then pass it to you, Kadir, which is so I mean, we've heard so far that Assad has been removed. That was something that Washington wanted, that was something that at various times, Erdogan wanted, although maybe he had at other times resigned himself to the reality of Assad as had many, as had many regional actors, but it was something that both countries wanted another. Another event that happened this fall is that fetula Gulen died, and Erdogan, of course, blames Fetula Gulen for the 2016 coup attempt, and that had been a thorn in the side of relations, because, of course, he was living in Pennsylvania, and that was not just a thorn in the side of government to government relations, but also people to people relations. And so far, HDS seems to be somewhat pragmatic in its vision for Syria, but we'll see what happens, even though it's a designated terrorist group. Stephen, do you think we can move past this kind of dysfunctional, transactional, US Turkey relationship? Is there an opportunity here, or is it just going to be business as usual going forward?

Steven Simon 29:56

Well with Trump, Donald Trump, you know, on the verge of taking office in January, President, I don't think you can really be confident about business as usual in virtually any any respect. We do know from from Trump's record in in his first term that he favored distancing the United States from what was going on in Syria. He asked for the withdrawal of US forces in Syria, the soldiers and Marines that we have deployed there as part of the defeat ISIS campaign. His the somewhat idiosyncratic, you know, policy process in Washington, combined with President Trump's difficulties maintaining focus, enabled DOD, principally, to maintain the US presence in Syria despite Trump's, you know, express desire to see them, to see them pulled out. It was kind of an unusual situation, I suppose, is his recent Trump's recent truth social post, which was very emphatic, you know, on this score, seemed to suggest that he was, you know, coming back with the intention of doing what, what he did not succeed in doing in his first term, which is to remove US forces.

If US forces are removed, then the situation of Syrian Kurds, regardless of how one wishes to label them, fundamentally changes and and they really are left with very little choice but to accommodate themselves to the new regime in Damascus. That is the only conceivable way in which they can, I think, fireproof themselves, or maybe reduce the risk of Turkish effort to

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extirpate the PKK presence, you know, in the north and subjugate the Kurdish communities. There, a withdrawal of US forces would also mean the removal of US control over Syrian oil fields, which whose, you know, production provides much of the revenue for for the Syrian Kurds in who have a de facto autonomy within within Syria, if that, if the revenues from that oil revert to the regime in Damascus, the Kurds will be correspondingly diminished in their ability to support, you know, their own, their own activities in the north. So, business as usual, I don't know, you know, there's, there will be substantial pushback in Washington to to President Elect Trump's desire to remove US forces. And Richardson, I think, you know, alluded to this as the good old I mean, you know, you it's difficult to underestimate, you know how strong congressional support is for, you know, for the Kurds and, but, but this, the constituency in Congress for the Kurds is no longer has its standard bearer, you know, Senator McCain and,

And you know, this raises interesting questions, which you know are beyond the scope of this panel, of course, but about the way in which the Senate in particular is going to relate to the new president on foreign policy issues generally. And you know, you can tell two different stories about what is likely to happen, and one of them is that the nature of the relationship between the legislature and and the executive branch has been really fundamentally changed by the by the president elect up until now, and that proponents of Kurdish autonomy or independence, or what have you, or a partnership between us. Forces and Kurds in Syria will simply bow to whatever you know, the president you know wants to do and won't insist on sort of the priorities that that were once you know, very, very important to them.

Adam Weinstein 35:01

Okay, thanks for that. Over to you, Kadir, what, first, what's possible in your in your analytical view, what's possible in the US Turkey relationship. And then, what, in your view, do you think Ankara wants to be possible in the US Turkey relationship? What would be their ideal scenario?

Kadir Ustun 35:19

Well, I think the most important thing on this front would be the US administration deciding to work with Turkey. That's been lacking for a long time now, since the start of the Syrian uprising, especially at the beginning, Rich mentioned that, you know, there was couple years of kind of aligned policies, but there was gradually divergent policies influenced by various factors. Obama's policy of trying to get a deal with Iran had an impact on his policy on Syria, and then there was a settlement process with the PKK, between the Turkish Government and the PKK in 2000 around that time, 2012 or so. But 2012 2014, I should say. But in the fall of 2014 when ISIS emerged from Iraq and march towards Syria, the divergence became, I think, clearer, and instead of coordinating closely with Turkey, Obama decided to reassure Turkey. So there's a difference about U.S. Support for the PKK on the ground their Syrian branch, YPG, we should really not use the word like Kurds or Syrian Kurds. Those are really two broad terms. I mean, KNC, Kurdish National Council, Turkey is largely okay with them, right? They're not fighting turkey. They're not, you know, part of PKK, etc.

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So Syrian branch of the PKK was given support by the US, and that support has continued in the form of training advanced arms, all sorts of missions, including, you know, holding taking care of sort of ISIS prison there with you know that 1000s of ISIS fighters right now, and PKK has always used that argument that we are here, we are Your reassurance against ISIS. We can. We are your reassurance against your insurance against Iran's influence and Russia's influence, although they never fought against those powers and for CENTCOM is particularly with the congressional support like Steve mentioned, it was, uh, there was a mission to fight ISIS, and Obama said, you have to do it without us, boots on the ground, right? So they advised them, and they they gave them air, air cover, and they participated in missions together.

And that policy allowed them to, you know, defeat ISIS, quote, unquote, whatever that means. Of course, we can, you know, debate that the merits of that argument, because couple weeks, just like two weeks ago, CENTCOM bounce on places in Assad governed area, saying that there were still ISIS pockets. I think once that overarching mission ISIS is defeating ISIS, once that argument couldn't be made as strongly, then they turn to the argument about confronting, not leaving the ground to Russia and Iran, and that kind of resonated with Trump. But Trump wanted to get out of Syria anyway, and because of media pressure, congressional pressures, he kind of ended up caving in. And it largely continued, continued the policy of Obama, but Ambassador Jeffrey's team, including Rich, was able to talk to talk about implement some sensible solutions on the ground, which created some sort of sort of reassurance for Turkey that you know us cared about Turkish concerns, but in the meantime, since 2016 Turkey you know intervened in on the ground help territory continue supporting the opposition and made sure that any new inflows of immigrants. Migrants would be kind of prevented and would stay in Syria. There's so many, more than 3 million refugees inside Turkey, so the policy of supporting the opposition and denying PKK territory in northern Syria, those became priorities for Turkey, whereas US policy started with, you know, defeating ISIS.

But that mission was no longer there realistically, and it turned into another argument for for continued US support, and I think past two weeks now, the even that rationale is, is not there anymore. So of course, the KKK is, you know, telling the Americans, telling CENTCOM that, you know, oh, if you're not here, who's going to who's going to take care of these ISIS prisoners. And they'll make different arguments to so that their support by the US continues, because that gives them a lot of legitimacy, training, advanced, you know, weapons, etc. But you know, the past two weeks still took away any kind of serious reason for the United States to continue that support for the PKK, PKK Syrian branch, and we've seen Turkey supported groups prevailing over the Assad regime. And Erdogan's calls last year or so on Assad to come to the table turned out to be basically kind of a last warning. Many people read it as a point of weakness, but that wasn't the case, because the opposition was strengthening, taking advantage of the past four years of calm and quiet through the Astana process. Once again, you know, Turkish diplomacy was successful in sort of managing the Russian and Iranian influences there, of course, Israel's attacks on Hezbollah, you know about in practical terms as well. There was no coordination. I don't believe that.

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But so it turns out, past two weeks has shown us, you know, Turkish policy, largely, you know, succeeded, despite all the detractors and whatever. But that doesn't mean, of course, things may not get messy. Things will be all happy dandy. These kind of situations post Civil War. You know, there are many different groups there. The opposition has been playing it smart so far, trying to be inclusive. And I think there's a lot of political guidance also coming from Turkey. And now, I think before Trump in his on his table, there are two main options, right? Are you going to actually go back to working with Turkey? Because that's your NATO ally, that's the state power. That is not a sub state actor that you know you don't know what to do with at the end of the day, right? And that sub state actor is now largely being isolated. They're being denied territory by, you know, Syrian groups. Turkey is pushing hard, and it has to push hard as long as it goes so and if you look at the history of this PKK activities in in Turkey and in the region for the last 4050, years, for, sorry, 40 years at least, that that teaches you that you know Turkey is not going to go by give up on this fight.

And I think it's, of course, going back to some of your news comments, I think it that's independent of Erdogan's, uh, political goals at home, um, Turkish state is seriously committed to an end, you know. And inside Turkey, that's the other thing a lot of people miss, sometimes that especially since 2016 failed coup attempt, and with the end of the Kurdish settlement process, the first one, Turkish Government has been very successful in pushing up, pushing against PKK inside Turkey. So but of course, PKK took that advantage. They saw it as an opportunity in the in the region, the ISIS emergence was an opportunity for them to say to the West that, look, we are the good guys. We have, you know, amazing female fighters. We fight for freedom, et cetera, and get all the Western support. And, you know, we can go on about that, but there was definitely lack of coordination with Turkey because a lot of Western leaders didn't want to talk with Erdogan. And so that created huge, you know, refugee problems, refugee pressures on Europe as well. And when Trump wanted to just get out, there was a lot of, you know, backlash against it as well. So I think Trump will need to decide either he wants to work with state actors in this region and coordinate with Turkey and drop that support for the PKK, or be comments by the arguments of, you know, CENTCOM, plus Congress, plus maybe Israel that you know you need to be on the ground, etc. And in that case, Turkey's policy will still remain the same, and they'll keep pushing I think, well, yes.

Adam Weinstein 46:08

There's a lot. There's a lot there. I appreciate that. I'm going to go back to Gönül, I was reviewing your book before this panel, and I was reading some of the excerpts where you you talked about HTS and Qadri had mentioned the Astana process. Now, originally, the understanding was that Turkey, and please excuse me if this is too simplistic, but Turkey was going to control Idlib, and it was going to be able to use Idlib as an observation post on Afrin and other PKK or strongholds, from its view. But in addition, it was going to defeat extremists, including HTS. It wasn't. It wasn't supposed to tolerate HDS. Of course, that's not really what happened. And HTS was HTS was able to march on Aleppo and then Damascus. So my question question for you Gönül, how much influence do you think Turkey has within HTS, and how much can Turkey shape events in post- Assad Syria?

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Gönül Tol 47:15

Great question. Before I turn to that, let me just say this building on what Kadir said. I mean, you ask them what's possible in Turkish American relations moving forward, right? And I think Kadir is right that there's this post Assad, Syria offers some opportunities for Turkish American relationship, especially if President Trump decides to withdraw from Syria, right? So that will remove a major irritant in relationship, which is Turkish, which is American partnership with the YPG, and also Erdogan or Turkey can pitch itself, as you know, we will take care of the fight against ISIS. So that will really, there is, there is potentially that can open a new page in Turkish American relations. But I also see potential problems moving forward, even if the United States decides to withdraw from Syria.

So number one is, you know, Israelis recently sees territory beyond the Golan Heights, and they've been bombing the regime targets. And just like Erdogan, how Erdogan sees an opportunity in a post Assad Syria, Netanyahu, too sees a lot of opportunities to tighten his grip on power, to expand Israel's regional influence. And I think I just this morning, Gideon Rahman from Financial Times wrote an excellent article about this, and he said Netanyahu might be angling for a legacy as the leader who expanded Israel's borders after 5050, years of retreat, and that is really with Erdogan, who also sees this as A huge opportunity, but these two leaders, they have conflicting visions for Syria, right? I don't think Erdogan mines and Islamist government in Damascus. Yes, they have been pushing for an inclusive government in Damascus, but yet the HTS will be leading those forces. So those visions might clash in Syria, Israeli visions and what Turkey wants to do in Israel in Syria might clash So, and also you have the Saudis and the Emiratis, who are very concerned about an Islamist government in Damascus. So those are close American partners in the region.

So the question is, how will the new Trump administration navigate these tensions among its regional allies. So I think that will really tell us how Turkish American partnership will evolve moving forward. So going back to your question, how much influence does Turkey have over HTS? I think it has significant influence. But. This is not to say that Turkey has full control over HTS. It has influenced mainly because, thanks to Turkey's military presence in Syria, in Idlib, HTS was given the opportunity to govern Idlib undisturbed for many years, so Turkish military had an impact. Their military presence and Turkey's diplomatic engagement with the Assad regime and Russia and others also shielded the HTS from major regime attacks, which also allowed HTS to grow into this ruling body, right? And another leverage that Turkey moves over HTS is the trade partnership. I mean, if you there's a lot of trade, illicit trade, going on between the border towns in Turkey and Idlib. And also the international aid. Turkey controls the international aid going in, into Idlib and the HTS run places that also, I think, help HTS legitimacy among locals.

So that's why I think Turkey holds significant leverage over HTS. But again, I don't think that it has full control, and I don't think that it can really dictate everything that it wants on the new government. But so far, HTS has been very pragmatic, has engaged everyone, including Iran. So I think Turkey, given the fact that HTS really needs outside allies, even the United

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States and the Western countries, to be able to keep governing Syria, to rebuild the country, to secure funds for infrastructure and all that that it will have to cultivate even closer ties with Turkey. Turkey will play a huge role in a post Assad Syria, which will give Erdogan further leverage over the new regime. But there are also, I think the key point here is going to be how Damascus would deal with the HB, the Kurdish problem, and the autonomous Kurdish region there.

Adam Weinstein 52:23

Thank you for that. So we have about maybe seven minutes left, so I'm going to go around with some additional questions, but we'll have to keep the answers short. My next question is for Rich, I mean, it strikes me that there's this festering wound, which is maybe we can say broadly, the Kurdish issue. And I don't mean to say that Kurds are a monolith, but there is this Kurdish issue for Turkey, and it has not really been resolved. And many of these other issues emanate from that. And of course, in October, develop who's the leader of the right wing Turkey Turkish nationalist movement, party, the MHP, and an ally of Erdogan, and there's a good foreign policy piece describing this, but he had said that he would support Ultra on the leader of the PKK, who is imprisoned. He would support Ultra on being granted parole if he were to renounce violence and disband the organization. Are we at a moment where a grand bargain is once again possible the way it seemed like it might be possible before 2014?

Colonel Rich Outzen 53:30

Well, it's an interesting question. There is a pivot point and there is a door open here, because two two lines are crossing here. The first is that since 2014 one of the things that has prevented sort of a revisiting of this opening that Kadir referred to earlier, because we have to remember also the AKP Erdogan's government has gone way, way further in terms of accepting political risk in dealing with the PKK and with Kurdish issues than did the the other ruling parties In, say, the 90s or the 80s, it's liberalized publication and broadcast in the Kurdish language. It has tolerated, not always easily, the primarily Kurdish opposition party, and in fact, as I mentioned earlier, many of the AKP founders were ethnic Kurds. They tried including intelligence, back channel contacts and extensive negotiations at some political risk domestically, to have a Kurdish opening to resolve this conflict and get the PKK to end its armed campaign in exchange for a political process just before the Syria war became what it was in 20, 1314, and 1510, years is a long time, but the start of that cycle was the US pumping a Huge amount of legitimacy and a huge amount of arms training and logistical support to that movement in Syria. Now, the movement, the YPG, has undoubtedly taken big blows over the last month. They've lost territories west of the Euphrates. They've lost relative traction vis a vis Damascus.

So in a in sort of a backward logic sense, this actually creates more opportunities from Ankara's perspective, because the weaker the YPG is on the ground, the more risk politically they can take in terms of negotiating a modus vivendi. And the other thing is that, again, as you noted, botulia, and this has at least ex officio support from ojalon himself, I think, has raised the idea that there can be another dialog. There can be a revisiting of the process in Turkey as well. The

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question is, can the old cadres, the militant leaders on the mountains of Iraq and Iran, do they care enough about because they have a way of life, they have a cause that they're invested in, that's a regional cause, even if it helps Syria and even if it helps the life of Kurds within Turkey, they may not be ready to make that deal. So the door is open with some wise and prudent statecraft in the United States, some responsible statecraft, which means we don't force anything, but we try to encourage and incentivize. I think the door may be open.

Adam Weinstein 55:57

Thanks for that Rich, Steven, two Minutes, if you can do you think that the United States will have an interest engaging in engaging in that kind of statecraft, and also to follow up with what Gunu was talking about. Do you think Washington is happy to have Turkey manage the situation in Syria, and does the US even really have a choice about the matter?

Steven Simon 56:22

I think we shouldn't lose sight to answer your questions of Iran or of Turkey, rather as a as an alliance management challenge for the United States, Turkey and the United States are NATO allies. Turkey is allegedly, you know, the linchpin of the southern flank of NATO, yet the Turks, from an American perspective, has have not acted in the spirit certainly, of of its alliance relationship with the United States and the NATO context and and, you know, the complaints are numerous. I mean, first, you know, the Turks were an impediment to the expansion of NATO and the context of the Russia Ukraine war. That was not appreciated. The Turks have been playing a game with with the Russians that included the purchase never really fully consummated. I don't think of \$4 100 anti aircraft missiles and raising, you know, fears of security compromises to US and NATO interests via the Turkish Russia relationship, which was which was certainly burgeoning for a while, the the Turks were also perceived, you know, I think correctly thinking back as having been supporters of ISIS as just as the United States was recognizing ISIS as as a threat that required a coalition military response.

And there's, I'm sure we can dispute this, but, you know, I've seen evidence of Turkish complicity in ISIS operations, so but perhaps that in for that information that was available to me was was inaccurate or misleading. I really, you know one at this remove. One doesn't really know, but the perception still persists that there was a kind of collaborative relationship between ISIS and the government in Turkey. So it's a complicated alliance relationship, and the United States has to focus on it, because, you know, if you're in an alliance as important as the one that the United States has with with NATO, you can't be indifferent to the interests of alliance members, specific Alliance members or problems that you encounter in in dealing with them, within that within that setting. Now, Trump is coming to office, you know, he's, he's ambivalent, I think at best, about NATO. So it's, it's really hard to say how the Alliance management aspect of of this broader set of issues that we've been talking about, will will influence Trump administration policy.

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As far as you know, the US concerns about Turkey in Syria, I think you know one, one thing that people are probably concerned about is the disposition of Turkish forces more broadly within Syria and and that's something that presumably one will keep one's eye on, because, you know, Erdogan. On, has taken a very aggressive or hostile posture toward Israel. He called upon the UN to authorize the use of force against Israel because of Israel's campaign against Palestinians in Gaza and so forth. Will he will? Will Erdogan ask the H the new HTS government for base access in Syria? Are the Turks interested in posturing their forces near to the Israeli Syrian uh border, assuming that Erdogan is actually interested in confronting, you know, Israel in a material way, or at least saber rattling in a way that could be destabilizing. I think people want to keep their eye on that. But I do think overall, the United States has an important role to play simply by removing sanctions, if that's what, if that's what Congress, you know, wishes to do, and reverting oil revenue to the to the regime in Damascus, just those two things alone would have a serious impact on what's going on in this, you know, new regime.

Adam Weinstein 1:01:24

Okay, thanks for that, Stephen. We're two minutes over. Gönül I know has to drop off because she has another obligation. I'm going to go one more minute over because I feel obligated to give Kadir at least a minute to respond to some of the things Steven said there. But please try to keep it brief, Kadir, because we have gone over, but the floor is yours, and you'll have the final word.

Kadir Ustun 1:01:45

In terms of alliance, I mean, Turkey has been proponent of NATO enlargement. It has never opposed it. It insisted on the Alliance recognizing its security concerns much more directly regarding the PKK Russia. I mean, Turkey has been, on the one hand, cooperating with Russia on many fronts, but Libya caucuses Syria in many places, Turkey is actually, you know, fighting against Russian interests on the ground. I mean, there's just, ISIS support is just like, I don't have a lot to say it's there's just, I mean, ISIS pulled off some of its biggest attacks inside Turkey. Turkey pushed them along from the border, along with the PKK. So there's a lot of history there that needs to be looked at.

One thing that needs to be clear is also that US is Turkey is not asking the US to leave Syria, Turkey has never actually asked that. Turkey is asking the US to drop its support for the PKK. That doesn't necessarily mean the US cannot make a new deal with the Damascus, you know, new emerging political power and and have forces on the ground for whatever strategic purposes goals, but actually, the Turks find the United States quite unreliable on on a number of fronts, because they renege reneged on their promises about pulling away from Manbij supporting the opposition, confronting Russians. Turkey shut down a Russian plane. What kind of you know when, just based on s4 100, you can't say Turkey became a Russian ally and all that. So anyway, with regard to Israel, there's no like Israel. Turkey has been very vocal about Israel's actions in Gaza, but it I don't recall them calling for taking military action by the, you know, UN Security Council against Israel.

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So that's a different story. But what I want to say, uh, instead of responding to some of this stuff, is that the US and Turkey has actually, they have a great set of opportunities they can negotiate. And there is a lot of history actually, for that. And this is, this doesn't mean only on the middle eastern front. I mean Ukraine. Turkey even supported both Georgia and Ukraine's inclusion in the in the NATO, in in the past. So there's a lot of issues, including, you know, Libya, all the way to Central Asia, Middle East, Ukraine, that they can cooperate. And I think they have more to cooperate than disagree. It just happens that PKK is a central, very direct national security concern and threat for Turkey until such time as PKK renounces violence against Turkey dissolves itself, becomes something else through maybe negotiations or whatever you're not going to. Will get Turkey to agree to any scenario where PKK continues to be stronger, gets Western support and try to become more influential. That just won't happen. And it won't happen not because of Erdogan. It's just like Turkish national security concerns are defined that way by the state for many decades.

Adam Weinstein 1:05:25

Okay, thank you for that, Kadir and thank you for everyone for joining in the audience, for staying on. I do want to acknowledge the the Hollings center for international dialog, which has supported some of our work on Turkey and has actually hosted great conferences on us, Turkey relations in Ankara and also in Washington. And we, I've benefited from supports from the Hollings center, and they have a small grants opportunity every year. So if you're listening to this and you do research related to the Middle East or US relations with the Muslim world writ large. I recommend that you go to Hollings Center's website and check it out. They've been very supportive, and I appreciate all of you for your time Kadir, I know it's late for you. I also encourage everyone to read Gönül's book. It's actually more, even more relevant now than when it was published. I think so. That's Erdogan War, and you can find it at most bookstores. And thank you all for tolerating my very anglicized pronunciation of Turkish names. I tried my best, and with that, we'll wrap it up, but I hope I can, we can do a second panel, maybe after Trump takes office.