

CONFERENCE REPORT

# The Future of Turkey- US Relations: Political and Security Dimensions





CONFERENCE REPORT

# The Future of Turkey-US Relations: Political and Security Dimensions

This is a report on a public session titled “The Future of Turkey-US Relations: Political and Security Dimensions”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2019, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

**© TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE**

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

**PUBLISHER**

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

JANUARY 2020

**PREPARED BY**

MUHAMMED LUTFI TÜRKCAN

**TRT WORLD İSTANBUL**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

**TRT WORLD LONDON**

PORTLAND HOUSE

4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

**TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.**

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

**[www.trtworld.com](http://www.trtworld.com)**

**[researchcentre.trtworld.com](http://researchcentre.trtworld.com)**

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants or writer(s), and do not necessarily reflect the view of TRT World Research Centre, its staff, associates or Council. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, TRT World Research Centre should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

# Speakers



## Çağrı Erhan

**President of Altınbaş University; Member of the Security and Foreign Council of the Presidency of Turkey**

Çağrı Erhan served as a full professor in the Faculty of Political Science, Ankara University, from December 2008 until May 2015. He was also the Director of the European Research Centre between 2000 and 2015. In June of 2015, Çağrı Erhan was appointed as the President of Istanbul Kemerburgaz University, which underwent a change of name to Altınbaş University in July 2017. Çağrı Erhan is the author of 'Turkish American Relations: Past, Present and Future'; 'Turkish Israeli Relations in Historical Perspective'; 'Turk-Amerikan İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Kökenleri (Historical Roots of Turkish-American Relations)'; and 'Avrupa Birliği Politikaları (European Union Policies)'. He writes a weekly political column for the Türkiye newspaper and he is a commentator for the Turkish TRT Haber television programme.



## Michael Doran

**Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute**

Michael Doran is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC, where he specializes on the international politics of the Middle East. In the George W. Bush administration, Doran served in the White House as a Senior Director in the National Security Council with responsibility for the entire Middle East, except Iraq. Before joining the Hudson Institute, Doran was a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He has also held teaching positions at NYU, and Princeton. His latest book, 'Ike's Gamble', is a study of President Eisenhower's Middle East strategies. He received a B.A. from Stanford and a Ph.D. from Princeton.



## Matthew Bryza

**Former United States Ambassador and Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council**

Matthew Bryza is a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and a Board Member of the Jamestown Foundation in Washington, DC. He was the director of the International Centre for Defence and Security in Tallinn, Estonia, from 2012 until 2015. During 23 years as a US diplomat, his assignments included the following: Ambassador to Azerbaijan, 2011 to 2012; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, 2005 to 2009; Director on the National Security Council Staff of the White House, 2001 to 2005; Political Officer in the US Missions to Russia, 1995 to 1997; and Political Officer in the US Missions to Poland, 1989 to 1991. Matthew Bryza currently resides in Istanbul and serves as a board member and executive in energy and environment services companies.



## Kılıç Buğra Kanat

**Senior Fellow at the TRT World Research Centre**

Kılıç Buğra Kanat is a Senior Fellow at TRT World Research Centre and the Research Director at the SETA Foundation, Washington, DC. He is also a Professor of Political Science at Penn State University, Erie, Pennsylvania. Kılıç Buğra Kanat was awarded the Outstanding Research Award and Council of Fellows Faculty Research Award at Penn State. He is the author of 'A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama's Syria Policy' (2015). He is co-editor of the edited volumes 'History, Politics and Foreign Policy in Turkey' (2011) and is a columnist.

## Summary

**T**

The Panel “The Future of Turkey-US Relations: Political and Security Dimensions” discussed the roots of the current tension between Turkey and the US and its future trajectory.

Regarding the alignment between the US and PKK’s Syrian offshoot, the YPG, Kılıç Buğra Kanat highlighted that a pattern characterized by US disregard of Turkey’s security concerns has been going on since the 1990s. Kanat pointed out the US neglected Turkey’s concerns regarding the PKK presence on the Iraqi border during the First and Second Gulf Wars, which happened again in Syria when the US allied with the YPG terror group.

Michael Doran stated the US officials were aware that they were essentially working with the PKK when they allied with the YPG in Northern Syria starting from Obama’s second term. Yet, they convinced themselves that it would be temporary, tactical, and transactional. Additionally, Doran claimed that the US failed to recognise how much they infuriated Turkey by lending international legitimacy to the YPG by allying with them and offering mediation.

Matthew Bryza pointed out that there is a flawed understanding of Turkey in the US, which is based on a lack of understanding. Bryza further claimed that President Trump does not seek allies and multilateral mechanisms based on the belief that the US is the strongest power and gets its way better in bilateral relations.

Regarding the extradition of Fethullah Gulen -the leader of the FETO (Fetullah Terrorist Organisation) - Çağrı Erhan pointed out that despite evidence presented by Turkey documenting that FETO orchestrated the coup attempt on July 15, 2016, the US has refused extradition. Erhan further claimed that the extradition decision has now become a political decision rather than a judiciary one.

# Report

## US Alliance with the YPG

The panel opened the session by discussing the ramifications of the US's alignment with the YPG terror group in Northern Syria, the PKK's Syrian offshoot. The panellists agreed that US officials were aware of the fact that they were ultimately dealing with the PKK when this alliance came into being during the second half of the Obama presidency. On that note, Michael Doran pointed out that, compelled to fight Daesh, the Obama administration sought the absolute lightest military footprint possible in Syria in order to avoid being sucked into the civil war and facing a potential direct confrontation with the Assad regime, Tehran and Moscow. In this context, the YPG appeared as a good option. Doran further argued that the Obama administration convinced themselves that this would be a temporary, tactical and transactional alliance and they also believed that they could work things out with Turkey. Yet, the alliance became entrenched and the US administration failed to understand how much they enraged a NATO ally Turkey by giving the YPG international legitimization.

Regarding the origin of the relationship between the US and the PKK/YPG, Çağrı Erhan recalled the direct contact between the American government officials and the PKK, established during the 1991 Gulf War. Erhan argued that this contact constituted the basis for the Obama administration's YPG decision in 2013. By acknowledging that there were meetings between the PKK leaders and US officials during the 1990s, Matthew Bryza noted that the PKK was not designated as a terrorist organisation at that time. This happened before the 2003 American invasion of Iraq when President Bush announced that destroying the PKK's haven in Northern Iraq was one of the objectives of the war. However, this order was never implemented. In this regard, Kılıç Buğra Kanat argued the US attitude towards Turkey showed the same pattern during the first and second Gulf Wars and also during the Syria crisis.

In all these cases, the US neglected Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK and affiliate presence in Northern Iraq and then in Northern Syria. Despite Turkey's continued warnings that the US support would provide the PKK with opportunities for capacity building, international legitimization and know-how which would threaten the Turkish homeland, the US prioritized the fight against Daesh in Syria and Iraq, disregarding Turkey's concerns. Kanat concludes that all of these developments have further increased the mutual mistrust between the two countries over the decades.

Çağrı Erhan also pointed out that the shadow of the past troubles and the US neglect of Turkey's concerns played a crucial role in the run-up to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. Erhan argued that after Turkey failed to convince the Trump administration on the establishment of a safe zone in Northern Syria, Turkey acted on its own to clear its border area with North East Syria of security threats.

*US officials were aware of the fact that they were ultimately dealing with the PKK when this alliance came into being during the second half of the Obama presidency.*





## The decline of the US Credibility

Given the ongoing debates around the future of the NATO alliance, the panellists also noted that the Trump administration failed to understand the importance of the alliance system by alienating its

*Trump does not yearn for allies and avoids involvement in multilateral organisations based on the belief that the US gets better results in by engaging in bilateral transactions.*

traditional allies such as Turkey, Japan, Poland and others. In this regard, Kanat pointed out that despite accusations levelled by the US officials as to whether Turkey is a reliable ally and questioning the merits of the whole alliance system, Washington should also ask itself whether they are a reliable ally or not.

Kanat added that being superpower entails institutionalization of the alliance system based on mutual respect and a firm commitment to the security requirement of the respective allies. As such, the US should clarify which role they envisage for themselves in the world and what they expect from the alliance system. Additionally, Bryza noted that Trump does not yearn for allies and avoids involvement in multilateral organisations based on the belief that the US gets better results in by engaging in bilateral transactions. However, Bryza argued that this represents flawed reasoning, which might ultimately destroy the power on which Trump is relying. Doran also noted that the US is uncertain of its role in the world and added that Turkey can help the US to understand what its role should be.



## Lack of Coherent US Strategy in the Middle East

Given the emerging pattern of the foreign policymaking process in the US, which can be characterized by the use of non-traditional channels and methods including tweets, bold statements and undiplomatic rhetoric, the panel discussed the implications of these shifts on the bilateral relationship. In this regard, Bryza noted that the normal process of making foreign policy has been broken. He added that former National Security Adviser John Bolton contributed to this process by downgrading meetings where different government agencies could have their say. This is in addition to Trump's tweets that have frequently contradicted statements released by the Department of Defence or State Department. Erhan further added that it is currently not clear who is responsible for foreign policy in the US and that multiple channels are standing in controversy when it comes to Turkey. As such, it is a necessity for the US to determine what it wants from Turkey.

Doran also noted that the broken system is evident from the efforts of military officers on the ground to affect Syria policy, thereby demonstrating what he referred to as a total breakdown in discipline that ultimately undermines the Trump administration. Re-

flecting a more nuanced perspective, Kanat claimed that the broken system is not the cause, but rather the consequence of the US' lack of coherent Middle East strategy. Kanat noted that the uncertainty and unpredictability of US policy toward Turkey results from the fact that the US has not had an overarching Middle East strategy since the presidency of George W. Bush. Thus, Kanat claimed, in the absence of overarching strategy, tactical and operational moves determine policy and whoever is responsible for that operation shapes policy-making.

*Turkey has reportedly shared 85 boxes of evidence demonstrating the link between FETO and the coup attempt.*

## FETO and the Coup Attempt

One of the main causes of strain between the US and Turkey pertains to the US attitude towards FETO, which Turkey accuses of being behind the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. Turkey has reportedly shared 85 boxes of evidence demonstrating the link between FETO and the coup attempt and asked the US to extradite the FETO's leader Fethullah Gulen. Thus far, the US has refused extradition. On this point, Erhan argued that the decision has become a political one rather than a judiciary one by noting the long history of the relationship between the US officials and the Gulenist organisation. Erhan added that the US had used this organisation as a means to fill the void in the post-Cold War era, particularly in Central Asia and in the Caucasus. For Erhan, by supporting their

institutions and schools, the US aimed at inculcating pro-American values among the youth who attended these institutions.

Kanat stated that the reaction of the Turkish people to the US regarding the July 15 coup attempt depends on multiple factors. These are particularly linked to the first reaction of the US, which highlighted continuity and stability rather than condemning the coup attempt and the presence of Gulen in the US and statement of the Director of National Intelligence saying that the US does not have the evidence that connects Gulen to the coup. All of these developments aggravated the ongoing trust and confidence problems.

## Future Trajectory of Relations

Regarding the future trajectory of the Turkey-US relationship, panellists noted that despite the increasing tensions, the relationship is far from unsalvageable. In this regard, Byrza stated that the relationship between the two has the potential to improve as long as Turkey does not go beyond the goals that have been articulated regarding Operation Peace Spring. Kanat also added that things may get worse before they get

better. Additionally, Doran pointed out that despite the harsh rhetoric, it is clear that Trump wants good relations with Turkey since it is a stable country that is willing and capable of taking action on its own, which Turkey proved this in successive operations in Northern Syria. Given the lack of capable and stable states in the region, Turkey stands as a reliable partner.

## Key Takeaways

- US relations with the PKK go back to the 1990s when contact was initiated in the context of the 1991 Gulf War. This relationship ultimately facilitated the US alignment with the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the YPG.
- The narrative regarding Turkey in the US is skewed and based on a lack of understanding and a lack of information.
- The US's disregard of Turkey's security concerns damages bilateral relations as potentially affects its credibility as a reliable ally.
- The US has not had a coherent Syria strategy, which has led the framework of counter-terrorism to dominate its Syria policy.
- The normal foreign policy-making process has been broken in the US, giving way to increasing unpredictability and uncertainty.
- The US reaction to the July 15 coup attempt in 2016 and its continued refusal to extradite FETO leader Fethullah Gulen has increased the mistrust towards the US from both the Turkish people and officials.

TRTWORLD  
**re|search**  
**centre**



TRT WORLD  
**research**  
**centre**