Affecting an Alliance

How are U.S.-Turkish relations affected by the existence of a large Kurdish nationalist minority in Turkey and Iraq?

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**Introduction**

The relationship between the United States and Turkey always has been an important one for both parties. Turkey’s geographical position made it an influential player that is able to shape the future of the region between the West and the wider Middle East and Central Asia. In the past, Turkey already played a central role in the Cold War by containing the Soviet drive toward the middle east and the Mediterranean.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But even before that, when Turkey was created under the image of Kemal Atatürk in the early 1920s, one of the main goals for the new Turkish Republic was to claim a place among the modern, Western, contemporary societies. To do this, it had to distance itself from its Islamic, eastern past that was so important during the Ottoman empire. This new start lead to a country that has always pursued the course of Atatürk and in the years after the Second World War, this process was supported and stabilized by Turkey’s firm inclusion in the Western alliance.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The United States has many interests in Turkey and the last twenty years many more themes found their way to the U.S. - Turkish agenda. From the NATO and the EU, to Iraq and Afghanistan after September 11. Also the problems in the Middle East and energy still play important roles in talks between those two countries. These matters are all very important to both of them and are therefore discussed regularly. The fundamental American long-term interest for Turkey is a stable, secular, democratic country allied to the West. On a visit by President Clinton on November 14, 1999 he said that: “"I believe the coming century will be shaped in good measure by the way in which Turkey itself defines its future and its role today and tomorrow. For Turkey is a country at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia; the future can be shaped for the better if Turkey can fully become a part of Europe, as a stable, democratic, secular, Islamic nation." Talks between the two countries are nowadays of a good nature because of the strong relationship that was created in the 1990s under Clinton’s presidency. Since then it got even closer as result of Turkey’s dependence on the United States for economic support and Turkish help to the United States after September 11 in the war against Iraq.[[3]](#footnote-3) Turkey certainly is important to the United States in many ways, for example, for continuing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. A stable, democratic Turkey in an unstable area of the world has been and will likely remain the most basic common strategic goal of both countries.[[4]](#footnote-4)

One important theme in the bilateral relationship is the status of Turkey’s Kurdish minority. First it is important to notice that they are the biggest stateless ethnicity in the world that counts 25 to 30 million people in four countries. Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria all have Kurds living on their grounds and most of those countries have trouble coping with this group. Mainly because they fight for independence and ultimately want a nation of their own. Iraq is the country that, since the fall of Saddam Hussein, does most for its Kurds. They are recognized, have their own autonomous province and play an important role in the Iraqi government. In Syria and Iran the Kurds are still heavily suppressed. In Iran, they are recognized but have little rights. The expression of the Kurdish culture and language are prohibited. Syria does not recognize the Kurds and has made them stateless nomads.

The problems with the 17 million Kurds in Turkey are often in the news. More than half of the world’s Kurds live in this country and fight heavily for independence. A well-known terrorist group is the *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* (PKK) founded by Abdullah Öcalan. According to Turkey, the Kurds are Turks and should behave like Turks. They should limit the Kurdish culture and may not speak their language in public.

What makes American foreign policy towards the Kurdish question in Turkey an interesting field of study is the fact that the American government has not got one coherent policy towards all Kurds. Openly they support the Turkish state that is the second largest military power of the NATO and their battle against the PKK. But at the time of the first and second Gulf War the Iraqi Kurds were heavily supported by the United States. They were an American ally in the battle against Saddam Hussein and are America’s favorite Iraqi’s until today.

The Kurds in Iraq and Turkey are however closely connected because of their shared ethnicity that live in four different countries. The borders between Iraq and Turkey are often crossed by the Kurds and the Turkish terrorist group PKK use Northern Iraq as a place to regroup and prepare. This is well-known information that cannot be surpassed by the American government while dealing with Turkey, an important military and economic partner.

In dealing with the Kurdish issue in Turkey the main goal for America is to keep Turkey a stable ally. To accomplish this, the United States needs a solution for the violent Kurdish struggle in Turkey which that has led to so many casualties over the last thirty years. To deal with their Kurdish problem, Turkey did come up with a policy regarding this prominent ethnic group. This policy has most of the time been one of violence being answered with violence. One example is Turkey’s incursion in northern Iraq in 1995, when they executed an offensive against the PKK that was hiding on the other side of the border. This is a strategy that is not well received in the United States and in Europe because of their alleged human right violations. Because the United States have quite a positive history with the Kurds in Iraq they find it hard to see how their NATO ally treats their Kurds. So how did the United States justify its policy to remain supporting the Turkish state? In one way or the other, the Kurdish problem in Turkey has definitely had any impact on the U.S. –Turkish relations over the last 25 years.

Studies about this topic are often very broad. They contain the Kurds in general or focus on American foreign policy towards the Middle East. There are also many scholars that study Turkey’s domestic policies, and therefore do not include the relation with America. Henri J. Barkey writes that only few western scholars have written about the Kurds in Turkey in comparison with the number of studies on other cultures in the Middle East. Even not by Turks and Kurds because this is forbidden by the state.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The main topic of this thesis is how the relation between the United States and Turkey has changed because of Turkey’s Kurdish minority. It will show that the relation between the U.S. and Turkey did not change a lot during the 1980s and 1990s, but that it did after the second Gulf War of 2003. During the 1980s and 1990s the Kurdish nationalist PKK fought heavily for more rights for Turkish Kurds and this caused the Turkish government to start an offensive after the first Gulf War of 1990/1991. The United States supported their ally and did not condemn the violence that the Turks used against its Kurds. What this thesis will explain is that the contrast between the Iraqi and Turkish Kurds eventually influenced the U.S.-Turkish relation more than alleged human rights violations by the Turks. Especially after the Turkish national elections of 2002 the relation changed for the bad. The new Turkish government, led by a pro-Islamic party rejected support for the U.S. in their upcoming war against Iraq. As this thesis will prove, their motivation had completely to do with the Kurdish question in both countries.

Many Scholars, like Martin van Bruinessen and David McDowall, focus solely on Kurdish history and culture or American or Turkish foreign policy. Michael Gunter on the other hand is an important expert in the relations between Kurds and other groups. All scholars agree that the Kurdish issue has created problems in the normally close relations between the U.S. government and their staunch ally and friend Turkey. Foreign policy issues involving the United States and Turkey have definitely come under influence of the Kurdish factor. An example is America’s criticism on Turkey for its human rights violations concerning the Kurds.

Another theme of discussion that scholars like Barkey and Gunter agree on is that there has not been much study on the Turkish Kurds. Most studies that are about the Kurds before the 1990s relate to the Iraqi instead of the Turkish Kurds. The discussion is about whether this is unjust or not . Gunter thinks this is unjust because half of the world’s Kurds live in Turkey. The study that has been done on the Turkish Kurds mostly view them from the perspective of the Turkish government or a Kurdish perspective. Writing about the Kurdish question has often only been about the parties directly involved; the Kurds and the nation they live in. Only rarely foreign policy towards those Kurds has been studied.

One major theme that will be addressed in this thesis is the debate about the different way America deals with the Turkish Kurds compared to the Iraqi Kurds. Gunter writes in an article called ‘United States Foreign Policy towards the Kurds’, written in 1999, that the United States tends to threat Iraqi Kurds as “good” Kurds, while it considers Turkish Kurds to be “bad” Kurds. Support of the Iraqi Kurds is perceived as supportive of overall U.S. Foreign policy against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Turkey, however, is seen as a valuable geostrategic NATO ally necessary to support to maintain its continuing allegiance. And support given the “good” Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as the political representatives of the Iraqi Kurds, the United States, has very strongly opposed the “bad” PKK. [[6]](#footnote-6)

The question among scholars is if it is fair to divide the Kurds into “good” and “bad”. Gunter writes that it is unfair. His argument is that, unlike the situation in Iraq (Iran and Syria for that matter too) where the Kurds are geographically distinct and largely unassimilated, many Kurds in Turkey have migrated out of their traditional homeland in the southeast and assimilated to one degree or another into the larger Turkish population. But one of the main reasons why the Turkish Kurds are seen as “bad” is because of the PKK. A group that is marked ‘terrorist’ in the United States. However, writes Gunter, the PKK does not represent a large percentage of the Turkish Kurds.

A subtheme is the reason Gunter gives why it is explainable that U.S. foreign policy supports the Turkish government above the Kurds. The seeming double standard the United States applies to the Kurds, of course, is really explained by perceived U.S. national interests. To them Turkey’s long-time and continuing geostrategically important position as an NATO ally is most important. The situation of the Kurds in Turkey, who do not present an immediate threat to the United States, is inferior to this.

Another subtheme that keeps returning in the literature is the difference between Western countries in dealing with the Turkish human rights violation towards the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey. Abramowitz writes that U.S. support for Turkey could not have been more different than Europe’s. European countries condemned terrorism but gave equal importance to much denied Kurdish rights in Turkey as they were sensitive to human rights. The US administration’s reaction to the news of the Turkish military intervention in northern Iraq in March 1995 was much milder than the response of European governments have been. The reaction of the public opinion and the press in the United States to the cross-border operation was much harsher.[[7]](#footnote-7) Also Kemal Kirisçi and Gunter claim that the U.S. government should have been much more critical of the Turkish government because they have the tools to pressure Turkey. According to Barkey the United States could have threatened Turkey with less military support. The Turkish leaders probably would have listened as they are very sensitive to U.S. pressure.[[8]](#footnote-8)

None of these discussions have been integrated to take a comprehensive look at how the Kurdish question affects U.S.-Turkish relations. A comprehensive look at this topic would be very important because the good relations between the U.S. and Turkey, which are important military partners, has been influenced a lot by the topic of the Kurdish question over the last thirty years. Studying the extent of this influence is therefore crucial to see how much shift there has been in their relation.

The importance for the United States to have good relations with Turkey are numerous. Above all, the geostrategic position of Turkey (a fact that is unchangeable) guarantees that the U.S. is willing to go far to maintain “friends”. Especially since the Middle Eastern region has become the main battle stage for the U.S. over the last decades. With operations against Iraq and in Afghanistan , tension towards Iran, and a close relation with Israel, the Middle East is a more than vital area of the world to have a democratic ally. This study of the changing relation between the two countries is therefore important.

The main theme of examination remains the influence of the Kurdish question in Turkey on U.S.-Turkish relations. Because this exact research topic has never been examined before, the unique factor of this thesis will be that it combines two main fields of study; American foreign policy towards Turkey and the problems with the Kurds in the Middle East.

It is relevant to examine American policy towards the Kurdish question in Turkey for several reasons. It might create more clarity on the question if American foreign policy’s actions regarding Turkey and its Kurds interferes with their official statements. This should be important to the U.S. and Turkey to maintain their good relation. Another reason why this study is important is because the Kurdish conflict in Turkey is still not over and might create tension in the U.S.-Turkish relation in the future. The United States have had to choose between the Turkish state and their Kurds many times over the last thirty years. It is important to know how much tension this Kurdish question caused in their foreign relations towards their friend and ally Turkey.

In this thesis three case studies will be posed in which the influence of the Kurdish question in Turkey on the American-Turkish relation will be explained. Subthemes that will be addressed are the justification of the United States for their policy and the discussion about the difference how Europe and the United States dealt with the Turkish state regarding their human rights violation.

To examine this, the first chapter introduces the Kurds, and in particular the Turkish Kurds. Then how the problem with the Kurds in Turkey came to be what it is now will be discussed. This will flow into an overview of the US-Turkish relation that became more interesting over the last three decades, when the Kurds first became an important issue to the United states in the buildup of the first Gulf War. The importance of U.S.-Turkish relations will be explained too in this part.

The three case-studies that are examined include the PKK, the first Gulf War and the second Gulf War. After introducing each topic, the way the U.S. view this topic and how it specifically influenced the U.S. -Turkish relation are examined.

The first case, the PKK, is important because they are most prominent Kurdish group that fights for Kurdish rights in Turkey. Their violent methods cause reactions from the Turkish government and forces them to create a policy on the Kurdish question. Of course this main threat to Turkey’ s stability is very closely followed by U.S. officials. Therefore it is important to see how such a violent Kurdish group influences good relations between Turkey and the United States.

Second is the first Gulf War. This was the time that the Kurds became a practical issue to both countries. The Kurds in Northern Iraq were protected and helped by the United States, while the Kurds in Turkey were still heavily suppressed. The chapter will examine how both nations reacted on UN measures and European pressure. This affected the U.S.-Kurdish relation as well.

Finally the second Gulf War is examined. During this War America got assistance from the Iraqi Kurds against Saddam Hussein. This made them a close ally such as Turkey before this War. Turkey resisted to assist the U.S. in this War and were afraid that their Kurds would want as much autonomy as the Iraqi Kurds after the second Gulf War. This was a War in which the Kurds once again caused tension in the U.S.-Turkish relation.

While discussing these cases, actions and official correspondence from the American government will be studied. This will be followed by how these acts can be explained from the official American foreign policy goals and how they justify the difference in their policy between the Iraqi and Turkish Kurds. As said before, the Kurdish question is one of the main factors that influenced the U.S.-Turkish relation over the last 25 years and it is therefore very important to look at American policy towards Turkey in the light of the Kurdish question.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**The history of the Kurds**

To get a good idea of the Kurdish question in Turkey, it is useful to shortly discuss the history of the Kurds. The militant attitude that the Kurds have towards their position in the countries they live in, especially Turkey, is hard to understand without any knowledge of the Kurdish history.

Kurds are originally an ethnic Iranian group mainly located, like written before, in four different countries. They are living in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. In this area, which they call “Kurdistan” live around thirty million Kurds. Apart from this area there is a diaspora of Kurds of approximately one million Kurds that live in cities around the globe. After Arabs, Persians and Turks the Kurds are the largest people to live in South-West Asia. Most of those Kurds speak a language that originated from the Iranian language called Farsi. This language is not standardized nor accepted as an official language in the countries the Kurds live in. Therefore they often speak the official language of the county they reside in as a second language. At this moment 18 percent of the Turkish population is Kurd and they live in the South-East part of Turkey that borders with Syria and Iraq (see map). This percentage equals 55 percent of the total Kurdish population worldwide. Another important issue is the fact that over 90 percent of the Kurds is Muslim. [[9]](#footnote-9)

*Map of Predominantly Kurdish Areas in the Middle East*

The first time in history that the Kurds are mentioned in the current region is during the 8th and 9th century. The Kurds lived there under the reign of the caliphs of Baghdad to which they often fought. At that time the Kurds did not own more than a small province they called Kurdistan. During the two centuries that followed they even managed to expand this province to five big principalities. In the 12th century the best period so far for the Kurds emerged. The Kurdish states at this point became so big, that if they were able to unite those different states into one big-Kurdistan, it probably would have still existed today. Unfortunately for them this area got overrun and incorporated by the Seljuk-Turks in 1150. Those new rulers did name a province Kurdistan, with Bahar, which is now located in Western-Iran, as a capital. In the 13th century the Mongols claim this area and eliminate this province. However, from the 14th century on the Kurds will create new principalities of which Ardalan was the most important one. The principality of Ardalan contained a large part of North-East Iraq, including Kirkuk and a part of Iran. This principality existed until 1876. During the 16th and 17th century the Kurdish history is full of bloody battles against the Ottomans. Many of those battles did not end well for the Kurds, but this did not stop them from fighting for independence.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**The Kurds in Turkey**

The Kurds in Turkey are historically known for their fierce battles against the people in power. The most famous revolt is the “Rozhiki-revolt” in 1655 between the Ottoman governor of Van named Melek Ahmad Pasha and the Kurdish warlord Abdal Khan about the city of Bitlis. This battle got lost and the Kurds in Turkey remained oppressed. To avoid this oppression in the 17th century some Kurds fled West and even reached the city of Angora (now Ankara), but most Kurds remained in the region of origin. After the Russian-Turkish War of 1828-29 the Kurds once again tried to fight for independence against the Ottoman rulers. This revolt, the Bedir Khan revolt, caused most Kurdish cities to be placed under the command of Ottoman governors. From 1847 until 1864 a province of Kurdistan existed within the Ottoman empire, but in 1964 this province got divided again into the previous provinces of Diyarbekir and Van.

The next big revolt, after the Krim War of 1853-1856, made the Ottomans tighten their grip on the Kurds even more, but around 1880, after another revolt, Sultan Abdul Hamid tried another strategy. He placed some important Kurdish leaders within his government to keep the Kurds peaceful. This appeared to be successful and the Kurds became a loyal partner to the government. Especially during the First World War when, in exchange for promises of independence and money, they took a big part in the execution of the Arminian genocide.

After the First World War two important treaties were signed that included deals towards Turkey. First the treaty of Sévres in 1920 that decided about the how the Bosporus is divided. In this treaty substantial autonomy for the Kurds is included as a reward for efforts during the war. However, after the Turkish War for independence (1919-1922) that made Kemal Atatürk become president in 1923, the treaty of Lausanne is signed. This treaty does not mention the Kurds at all and they are back to square one.

With Atatürk as the leader, the country of Turkey was created and molded to the ideas of the man in charge. It became modernized and, more important, secularized. The Kurds , of whom 90 percent was a devoted Muslim, detested this secularization. The centralization of power heavily decreased the power of local clan-chiefs and chances of Kurdish independence. The sudden assigned Turkish nationalism is even until today a huge problem for the Kurds.

After the First World War the western powers (especially Great-Britain) promise the Turkish Kurds all kinds of liberties, but almost none of them can be fulfilled. The only thing they achieve with support of Great-Britain is the foundation of the Kurdish republic of Ararat in 1927. Three years later however, this area is recaptured by Turkey and the leaders are executed. This is not the only example of a supported Kurdish republic in the beginning of the 20th century. In Iran the Kurdish republic of Mahabad was founded with support of the Soviet Union, but this republic did not survive the Second World War.

During the 20th century Turkey had to deal with several big Kurdish revolts. The years of 1925, 1930 and 1937-38 are the most violent years in which the Kurds tried to fight for independence. Until the coup of 1960 there are several talks in the Turkish government about more autonomy and political power for the Kurds, but after this coup these stopped abruptly. At the end of the 1970s the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK) was founded by Abdullah Öcalan to fight for Kurdish rights.

What this short historic overview shows is that the Kurds are a people with a history in which they always had to fight for their soil. They have an own culture and even a language that differs very much from the culture and language of the people surrounding them. The big difference is the fact that those people do have their own country. For the last thousand years the Kurds consequently managed to conquer a bit of independence, which they lost time and again. The current Kurdish battle of the PKK in Turkey can easily be explained from this perspective. That the Kurds in Iraq have a reasonable form of autonomy in the Northern province of Kurdistan must be a giant motivator for all the Kurds that still fight for a place of their own.

**The United States and Turkey**

The relation between the United States and Turkey always has been an important one for both parties. Turkey’s geographical position made it an influential player that is able to shape the future of the region between the West and the wider Middle East and Central Asia. In the past, Turkey already played a central role in the Cold War by containing the Soviet drive toward the middle east and the Mediterranean.[[11]](#footnote-11)

But even before that, when Turkey was created under the image of Kemal Atatürk in the early 1920s, one of the main goals for the new Turkish Republic was to claim a place among the modern, Western, contemporary societies. To do this, it had to distance itself from its Islamic, eastern past that was so important during the Ottoman empire. This new start lead to a country that has always pursued the course of Atatürk and in the years after the Second World War, this process was supported and stabilized by Turkey’s firm inclusion in the Western alliance.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Since this Second World War, the United States has been Turkey’s closest ally. Also the U.S saw Turkey, along with Greece, as an important partner in the Cold War and occupied a special place in American global policies. Their good relations have not always been the case. The bilateral relationship has in fact never been totally conflict free. Although their security and military ties seemed unbreakable, there were serious ups and downs in the relationship.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The outstanding relationship during the 1950s was followed by a growing anti-Americanism that influenced the attitudes of the ruling elite. Those attitudes hardened significantly during the second half of the 1970s, following the arms embargo imposed after Turkey’s military intervention in Cyprus. The 1980s, with Turgut Özal as the Prime Minister of Turkey meant a new era of U.S.-Turkish relations, including close cooperation in the Gulf War and changing Turkish perceptions of the United States. The change was at the same time as the end of the Cold War and the “technology-generated prospects for globalization.” Those free market reforms set in motion during the 1980s were a major theme in U.S.-Turkish relations over the last decades.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The United States has many interests in Turkey and the last twenty years many more themes found their way to the U.S. - Turkish agenda. From the NATO and the Balkans in the 1990s to Iraq and Afghanistan after September 11. Also the problems in the Middle East and energy still play important roles in talks between those two countries. These matters are all very important to both of them and are therefore discussed regularly. The fundamental American long-term interest for Turkey is a stable, secular, democratic country allied to the West. Talks between the two countries are nowadays of a good nature because of the strong relationship that was created in the 1990s under the presidency of Bill Clinton. Since then it got even closer as result of Turkey’s dependence on the United States for economic support and Turkish help to the United States after September 11 in the war against Iraq.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The few American politicians that are deeply interested in the U.S.-Turkish relations constantly search for ways to deepen this relation and to develop a coherent long-term strategy toward Turkey. There is a term that is often used to describe the recent relationship between the two countries and it is used by both American and Turkish politicians: a strategic partnership. From the point of the American government, the United States has had something of a strategic partnership towards Turkey for a long time in NATO and in both Gulf Wars. Not all has been an equal partnership, but sometimes it were the United States dragging Turkey along as partner. Nevertheless, because of Turkey’s size, location, strength, orientation, and its involvement in so many place of interest to the United States, there is almost a natural American interest in deepening close working relations with Turkey concerning those common interests. Turkey certainly is important to the United States in many ways, for example, for continuing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. A stable, secular, democratic Turkey in an unstable area of the world has been and will remain the most basic common strategic goal of both countries.[[16]](#footnote-16)

That the Kurdish question in Turkey had a certain influence on their relation with the United States is no surprise, but before I will discuss this I will look closer at some themes that dominated the discussion between Turkey and the United States over the last 25 years.

**Themes in the U.S.-Turkish relation**

First of all there’s the NATO. This military organization has in the United States and Turkey the two largest armies. Turkey takes security and its membership of the NATO very seriously and therefore revises its military regularly. Being in an instable region it spends big amounts on the defense budget. For Washington Turkey’s NATO membership is important for numerous reasons. As the only Muslim member of the NATO it has influence against other Muslim countries like Iran. Because of their loyal membership countries in the region therefore cannot easily ignore Turkey’s opinion.[[17]](#footnote-17) This commitment and the fact that the U.S. needs them is also used by the Turks to get military aid from the U.S.. Especially concerning the first and second Gulf War, Turkey stressed the alliance with the United States and tried to profit from their good NATO-relation when American troops needed to use Turkish air bases in their wars against Iraq.

As discussed before, another major theme is Turkey’s more than convenient position between the East and West. It is almost literally the gate to the Middle East and in this region, Turkey self-proclaims to be the leader of the Arabic world. This instable region, where the United States are very active with wars against Terror it needs Turkey as an ally. To have a stable, democratic country in such a sensitive region worth a lot to the West, and especially the United States. The strategic importance of Turkey is widely shared among European countries, as is their active role within NATO.[[18]](#footnote-18) Their geopolitical role is not only important to create more democratic, peaceful countries the Middle East, but also for economic reasons. Many energy sources for the West come from that instable region and for this Turkey could definitely be of value as the closest ally.

Another country in that region where Turkey and the United States discuss about is Israel. Since March 1949, when Israel was the first Muslim country to recognize the State of Israel, those two countries had close relations. They share concerns with respect to the instabilities in the region and therefore military, strategic, and diplomatic cooperation between Turkey and Israel were regarded high priority by the governments of both countries. In the 1980s there were some setbacks in their relation when in December 1987, Turkey denounced "Israeli oppression", and supported the Palestinians’ right to self-determination. Their relationship got back to normal during the 1990s. [[19]](#footnote-19) That the United States are pro-Israel and undertaking attempts to solve this conflict is well known. But doing so, it also has to deal with Turkey.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The improving relations between Turkey and Israel throughout the 1990s have changed the strategic setting in the Middle East which helped Washington perceive Ankara as a more balanced regional player.[[21]](#footnote-21) An important year in this matter was 1996, when Turkey’s anti-Israel Welfare party lead a coalition government. Most American politicians were surprised that the State Department in Turkey accepted the new coalition because the Welfare Party was an Islamic fundamentalist group similar to that ruling Iran after its 1979 revolution. The coalition by Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan included the Motherland Party of Tansu Ciller. She had previously opposed the Islamic fundamentalists but apparently thought her position as both deputy prime minister and foreign minister would moderate Erbakan’s anti-Western attitudes.[[22]](#footnote-22)

U.S. support for Turkey’s new government was demonstrated in August when U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright met Erbakan and gained approval for renewing Operation Provide Comfort’s mandate, an operation protecting Iraqi Kurds against Saddam Hussein. Erbakan’s coalition did arouse U.S. concern when in October 1996, Erbakan ignored U.S. warnings by signing trade agreements with Libya, Iran, and Iraq, nations on whom the United States had imposed economic sanctions.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In recent years, under the Turkish government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the relationship between Turkey and Israel has cooled down. A famous example is Erdoğans critique on the 2009 World Economic forum in Davos where he spoke harshly to Israeli President Shimon Peres about Israel’s military actions in Gaza. After he spoke Erdoğan left the room annoyed, leaving the other speakers with a certain amaze.[[24]](#footnote-24) Clearly, Turkish-Israeli relations are not as good as they used to be, a situation that certainly worries U.S. officials.

The EU is a topic that is also important to U.S.-Turkish relations. The United States have always strongly supported Turkey’s admission into the EU diplomatically because the U.S. always wanted Turkey to have string alliances with the West. To become a member of the EU is the easiest and cheapest way to support this. If it became a member, it would be economically more dependent of the EU, and not of the United States. Within America there are two schools of thought about why Turkey still is not a member of the EU after so many years. Some conservatives think that the Europe does not want 70 million Muslims in the EU and it’s border stretched to Iraq and Ira. Another group, mostly liberals dedicated to Turkey’s admission, thinks that the EU simply does not have genuine interest in Turkey as a member and recognizes Turkey’s dilemma that it could reform drastically and still not get into the EU.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Many discussions between the United States and Turkey in the last twenty years covered the energy topic. Turkey wants to participate in developing and marketing the large oil and gas resources locates in the Caspian Sea region (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan). They do this because Turkey has high energy demands. Of far greater importance are the pipelines by which the energy resources are transported to Turkey and the West. The Turkish plan with a pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan would make them an attractive alternative to Russia of Iran. This plan would make the United States a dominant strategic force in Central Asia. An effective energy outlet from the Caucasus to the West via Turkey would severely diminish the power of Russia and Iran. In the 1990s the Clinton policy put high priority on this because American strategists were convinced that developments in the Caspian region would have a decisive impact on the American influence in this process.[[26]](#footnote-26)

During the first and second Gulf War Turkey and the United States had to deal with each other too. The first Gulf War created many Kurdish refugees fleeing to the Turkish border in the North. America negotiated with Turkey about how to handle these Kurds and even was able to use Turkish soil to help Iraqi Kurds against the Iraqi government. Because the Kurds in Turkey were mistreated the United States pressured the Turks to provide aid to the Kurds in the borderlands. The second Gulf War also caused the United States and Turkey to deal with each other. America under the presidency of George W. Bush wanted to use air bases in the South-East of Turkey to attack Iraq, but this was not allowed by the Turkish government that was led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This obviously created tensions between the two countries and showed the changing relationships.

Among those subjects the United States and Turkey discuss –and have discussed- over the last decades are also the internal Turkish conflicts. A topic that has been high on the agenda is the conflict of Cyprus with Greece. Many times has the international community, including the United States, tried to talk with Turkey about it and find a solution. Until now this has not been very successful. Within the Turkish borders the Turkish government has to deal with their minorities. The ones most noticeable are the Armenians and the Kurds. Regarding the Armenians, the United States and Turkey have discussed this topic the last decades mostly about the use of the term “Armenian genocide.” The U.S. congress still debate it every few years, and Turkey still gets very angry when they this term is used.

This definitely is not true regarding the discussion about the Kurds. Because of the violent Kurdish struggle that leads to many casualties over the last thirty years, Turkey had to come up with a policy regarding this prominent ethnic group. This policy has most of the time been one of violence being answered with violence. A strategy that is not well received in the United States and in Europe. The Turks are accused of human rights violations against the Kurds and this is a topic of debate within the international community. Because the United States have quite a positive history with the Kurds in Iraq it could find it difficult to see how their NATO ally treats its Kurds. To justify this the United States might see those (violent) Turkish Kurds as “bad”, and the Iraqi Kurds, that fought alongside the U.S. against Hussein, as “good”.[[27]](#footnote-27) In one way or the other, the Kurdish problem in Turkey has definitely had any impact on the U.S. –Turkish relations over the last twenty-five years. In the next chapter the violence that is used by the Turkish Kurds to gain more rights will be discussed more closely.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**The PKK as a threat to Turkish stability**

Turkish actions related to the PKK are very closely followed by U.S officials. Some important examples are the arrestment of their leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the rise of PKK linked political parties and Turkish aggression against the PKK on Iraqi soil. The main reason why the U.S.-Turkish relation could be pressured by the PKK is the fact that it threats the stability of the Turkish state. As seen before, the United States wants their NATO-ally Turkey to be stable, secular and democratic. Therefore it is important to see how this main threat to Turkey’ s stability influences the relations between Turkey and the United States.

**The rise of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey**

The Kurdish resistance to the Turkish state and its policies has not emerged with the PKK. It dates back to the late phase of the Ottoman empire.[[28]](#footnote-28) The PKK is however the most violent, radical and successful Kurdish movement that Turkey has known during the 20 and 21st century.[[29]](#footnote-29) This PKK grew out of two separate but related sources. First the nationalist movement and second the leftist, Marxist movement that had formed in the 1960s.[[30]](#footnote-30) The PKK is in fact an unusual phenomenon among Kurdish nationalist movements, particularly in its left-wing origins. Most other Kurdish parties, especially in Iraq, have emerged from more traditional Kurdish circles with a specific regional goal and tribal orientation. They represented the least assimilated of the Kurdish populations. The PKK on the other hand grew out of the anarchy and turmoil during the 1970s when a number of radical violent left-wing Turkish groups emerged.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In 1973, a group of left-wing students from Ankara University secretly founded the party. From the beginning, Abdullah Öcalan, a dropout from the political science faculty, was their leader.[[32]](#footnote-32) Five years later, in 1978, the PKK decided to hold its first congress and officially establish itself. Because of the high number of small Kurdish terrorist groups, the PKK does not stand out in the beginning. But after its initial actions that target rivaling Kurdish groups and an assassination attempt on a member of parliament they quickly get a name as the most effective group in the South-East of Turkey. This also lead to more security attention and that’s why the leaders of the party decided to go to Syria and manage the PKK from there. [[33]](#footnote-33)

At the end of the 1970s Öcalan is building his party with financial support of Jalal Talabani, the former leader of the PUK, a Kurdish political party in Iraq. While the PKK gains support from Kurds of all four countries, Öcalan makes sure that his troops get a military training by the PDFLP, a movement from Palestine. In 1980 the PKK return to Turkey to start a guerilla War. However, before they are able to set up camps within Turkish borders, a coup is committed by the Turkish military. The PKK did already become a prominent Kurdish nationalist movement by killing 354 Turks before this coup. This caused the new government to start an offensive against the PKK and other Kurdish terrorist organizations. Officially 1790 members are arrested, most of them end up in jail but others got executed.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The PKK really launched its military operations against the state in August 1984 after consolidating its position in the southeast following a bitter internecine struggle with rival Kurdish organizations. From then on, the PKK began to gather strength. Though unprofessional at the beginning, its recruits with time gained experience as the PKK reached its peak between 1991 and 1993.[[35]](#footnote-35) Officially the Kurdish War against Turkey took until 1998.

Because of close relations with Syria, Iran and especially Iraqi Kurdistan is the PKK able to operate from Northern Iraq. This is their base and when battle is difficult they move back over the border. Most of the attacks on Turkey happen from there. Before the first Gulf War Turkey and Iraq had an agreement to attack the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds in Northern Iraq. But after this War even the Iraqi Kurds fight the PKK.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In the most successful period of the PKK in the beginning of the 1990s they were able to beat the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) with relative ease. The PKK was able to control much land and even some cities in the South of Turkey. This was due to the fact that the TAF did not feel responsible for battling the PKK. The military police had to fight them, but they were untrained and under armed. In 1993, the PKK was named the biggest threat to the Turkish nationality and became enemy number one to the Turkish state. Two major things changed. On a domestic level was the TAF given orders to do fight the PKK with full force and on a regional level were Syria and Iran forced by Turkey to give up their support for the PKK. This only happened in 1998 and meant the official victory for the Turkish state. Abdullah Öcalan, who kept his base in Damascus since the 1970s, fled to Kenya and was arrested in February 1999. In Turkey he was convicted for the death penalty, but this was changed to a life sentence.

Since 1999 there are still members of the PKK in Turkey, especially around the Turkish/Iraqi border. Their support among the Kurdish population in Turkey diminished drastically and they lost control over Iraqi Kurdistan to the PUK and KDP, which are the main Kurdish political parties in Iraq. The PKK even changed their name twice. First to KADEK in 2002, but after November 2003 the terrorist group called itself KONGRA-GEL. Nowadays they are called PKK again.

Many Turkish political parties had relations with the Kurds and often were accused of being closely involved with the PKK. Those parties did not see the Kurdish struggle for independence as “illegal” and the PKK were no terrorists in their opinion. The parties related are in chronological order: People’s Work Party (HEP)/Democracy Party (DEP)/People’s Democracy Party (HADEP)/Democratic People’s Party (DEHAP)/Democratic Society Party (DTP) and Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). All those parties were banned one after another.

To fight the PKK, the Turkish government installed a special paramilitary antiterrorism unit that also infiltrates Iraq. Many paces were bombed and alleged PKK-members arrestments were made over during the last two decades to win the peoples trust back. This strategy has proven to be very intense, but also very successful. The leading party AKP from prime-minister Erdoğan makes a clear difference between the PKK and the other Kurds. The pro –Islamic AKP sympathizes more than previous leading parties with the Kurds because of their religious background, but tries to exterminate the PKK. Erdoğan also thinks that the international community often confuse the PKK and the Kurds, which according to him is unjust.

**The United States and the PKK**

The PKK has always been strongly opposed by the United States. The importance of having Turkey as a string NATO ally with its geostrategically important position is clearly the main reason for this. There are however also other explanations why the U.S. refuse any support for the PKK. America’s fear of Islamic fundamentalism and Turkey’s developing alliance with Israel in the 1990s contributed also to their strong anti-PKK policies. As a secular state since the start of the Turkish republic in 1923, the United States see Turkey as a “bastion” against Islamic fundamentalism and U.S. support of Israel has always been very important to the U.S.. This are therefore important reasons for the United States to support the Turkish state and oppose the PKK as a strong form of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey.[[37]](#footnote-37)

There are some very important developments that show U.S. foreign policy in their support for Turkey against the PKK. In the U.S. annual human rights report they keep on criticizing Turkey for their treatment of minorities such as the Kurds it also makes it clear that the PKK is a terrorist organization who “frequently kill noncombatants, and target village officials, village guards, teachers and other perceived representatives of the state.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The State Department has also placed the PKK on its list of terrorist organizations.[[39]](#footnote-39)

According to Toni Marshall in the Washington Times, at the end of the 1990s the PKK is not supported any more by the majority of Turkish Kurds.[[40]](#footnote-40) This is based on the percentage of voters on the HADEP party. This was the only legal political Kurdish party that took part in the Turkish elections in April 1999. Although this party was later banned for its alleged support for the PKK it received 4 percent of the total vote. Michael Gunter on the other hand argues that this 4 percent “greatly underestimated the support and sympathy that exists for the PKK in Turkey.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

He gives three arguments for this allegation. First, the threats and “coercive methods” by the Turkish state to discourage and prevent Kurds to vote for the HADEP party. This slander campaign did not affect any other competing parties. Then, the military was instructed by the Turkish state to force many potential HADEP supporters out of their homes and move to diminish local support for the PKK. Those migrants were not registered to vote what also led to less HADEP voters. Finally, the state’s firm tactics against any form of support for Kurdish national rights had led to the elimination of almost all moderate groups supporting Kurdish rights. These measures by the Turkish government resulted in the fact that the PKK had almost become the only representative of the Kurdish cause in Turkey. Gunter therefore claims that the support for the PKK at the end of the 1990s was “clearly stronger than the mere 4 percent” that voted for HADEP.[[42]](#footnote-42)

There are also U.S. officials that contradict Toni Marshall and agree more with Michael Gunter. Those people claim that the State Department has compiled a large dossier on the PKK that includes many illegal activities such as murder and drug trafficking.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Another argument Gunter makes about how far the United States go when choosing the Turkish government above the PKK refers to Kosovo. As NATO-partners both the United States and Turkey were involved in the Kosovo mission. In this case NATO (led by the U.S.) bombed Yugoslavia to force its troops out of Kosovo and give the Albanian residents their chance of obtaining their minority rights or even independence. This situation was immediately compared to the Kurds in Turkey. The United States, however, did not see any double standard regarding the Turkish Kurds. The U.S. State Department spokesman declared that “the comparison is not accurate (…) Turkey is a democratic country, committed to seeking a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue (…) A comparison is grossly unfair.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Many Turks on the other hand feared that the United States after Yugoslavia would try to effect similar changes in Turkey.[[45]](#footnote-45) Looking at the different relation the U.S. had with Turkey compared to Yugoslavia, it never seemed very likely that such a thing would happen.

**The United States on Abdullah Öcalan**

When Turkey demanded Syria to expel Öcalan from Damascus in 1998 or it would go to War Syria listened. The United States also pressured Syria by sending a “strongly worded” letter regarding the situation. Öcalan then fled via Russia to Rome, Italy. For a short time it seemed that he was able to turn his military defeat into a political victory by having the EU supporting him. The Italians and the Germans seemed sympathetic, but eventually agreed with the United States who marked him as a dangerous terrorist. The U.S then pressured Italy and other states that wanted to help Öcalan to hand him over to Turkey to stand trial.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The Turkish Daily News reported about an editorial from the U.S. State Department broadcast by the Voice of America (VOA) in December 1998 that declared: “It is neither U.S. practice nor policy to provide an international platform from which terrorists can expound their views or try to justify their criminal actions. No one should doubt our views on Öcalan; the United States considers him a terrorist who should be brought to justice for his crimes.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Italy finally let Öcalan go in January 1999 but this angered U.S. officials. James Foley, the acting spokesman of the U.S. Stated Department declared that “the road taken by Italy does not serve in the goal of Öcalan being tried.”[[48]](#footnote-48) U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright again asked other countries to deny Öcalan and send him to Turkey. Without a country, Öcalan in vain tried to be hosted by Russia, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Desperate, Öcalan finally allowed the Greeks to take him to their embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. United States officials then informed the Turkish government about his whereabouts which made it able to capture him.[[49]](#footnote-49)

**The influence of the PKK on U.S.-Turkish relations**

There are some very good examples of moments when the PKK as an expression of Kurdish nationalism created tension in the U.S.-Turkish relation. Especially during the 1990s, when the PKK was highly active, it managed to pressure the good relation between the United States and Turkey.

Within the politics of the United States former Republican representative John Porter from Illinois and his wife, Kathryn, have been very critical on Turkey’s policy toward the Kurds at every opportunity in the mid-1990s. When he was chair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, Porter constantly tried to cut down the annual military aid the United States gave to Turkey. He was supported by the widespread sympathy in the United states for the Kurdish situation. Kathryn Porter even claimed that Turkish agents followed her in 1994 when she paid a visit to Turkey to monitor a trial against some Kurdish lawyers who were accused of separatism. Although most of the efforts by John and Kathryn have been cancelled out by the U.S., executive and the plenary congress, they still caused tension and misunderstanding between the United States in Turkey.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Not only in the U.S. emerged politicians that had severely doubted the sincere meaning of the other nation’s actions. Turkish politicians as Necmettin Erbakan and Bulent Ecevit have spent most of their time in Turkish parliament criticizing the U.S.-led Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). This was the name of the operation that helped the Iraqi Kurds against Saddam Husseins violence and will be discussed extensively in the next chapter. Those politicians feared that OPC represented an invading force that secretly tried to create an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq that will then make territorial claims on Turkey’s southeastern provinces. Some politicians even accused OPC of dropping supplies to the PKK or helping PKK wounded. This latter accusation was made more believable because of some accidental drops that had fallen into PKK hands.[[51]](#footnote-51) The allegations of these Turkish politicians obviously did not contribute to the U.S.-Turkish relation.

Besides the U.S and Turkish politicians that criticized each other’s actions, the PKK, who was hoping for a more European-style approach, became heavily disappointed in United States policies. From the beginning of the 1990s, the PKK was very suspicious of U.S. intentions toward it. This was based on Washington’s leading role among Western countries in calling the PKK as a “terrorist” organization.” At the end of the decennium the PKK is not only disappointed with the U.S. it also sees the it as Turkey’s main supplier of arms used against the Turkish Kurds and the main ally to Turkey in defending their government against critique from European countries about Turkey violating human rights against the Kurds.[[52]](#footnote-52) Thirdly, the PKK believed that the U.S and other nations that helped the Iraqi Kurds worked closely together with the Turkish government, and particularly with Turkish intelligence. They also accused the United States military, based at the U.S.-Turkish base in Incirlik to provide intelligence to the Turkish army about locations of the PKK forces in northern Iraq in order to facilitate the army’s attack on the PKK there.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The leader of the PKK until 1999 Abdullah Öcalan shared the PKK’s critique on the United States. In 1995 Öcalan said that the U.S., by claiming that the PKK was “the principal representative of international terrorism,” it showed an “enormously unfair assessment” that “could only be an imperialistic view.” One year later, Öcalan declared that “the United States has won the enmity of the Kurds through the support it extended to Turkey.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

At the time Öcalan was captured in 1999 the United States very much needed Turkey. They wanted to use Turkish air bases for U.S. planes to bomb Iraq in support to the Iraqi Kurds against Saddam Hussein’s regime. It was important for the United States to give its ally Turkey ally a concrete sign like Öcalan, especially because at the same time Iraq’s deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz was in Turkey in an attempt to end Turkey’s support for the United States. Eventually Turkey kept their supporting for its NATO ally and declined Iraq’s propositions.[[55]](#footnote-55) “Mark Parris, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, happily spoke of “Öcalan’s rendition,”[[56]](#footnote-56) an archaic term referring to the surrender of a fugitive slave.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

Some events caused by the PKK had an indirect effect on U.S.-Turkish relations. For example Turkey’s relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors have decreased since the PKK emerged at the end of the 1980s. Turkey’s bordering neighbors Iran, Iraq, and Syria have, to a different extent, found it hard to resist ties with the PKK. Every nations had its own motives create such ties. In Syria, sponsoring the PKK was seen as a good way of influencing the issue of the use of the water of the Euphrates river basin. In Iran, having relations with the PKK has been used to show again its displeasure about the presence in Turkey of members of the violent Iranian oppositionist grouping, the Mujaheddin-e Khalq. In the case of Iraq, where the PKK’s room for operation since 1991 has been much more related to the political situation in the northeast of the country, the government has also created ties with the PKK as a way of demonstrating its antipathy towards trans-Atlantic policy.[[58]](#footnote-58) These tensions created by the PKK between Turkey and it’s Middle Eastern neighbors indirectly affect its relations with the U.S. As mentioned before, the United States likes Turkey to have close ties with the Middle Eastern countries, because this benefits U.S. influence on that region.

A final example of a misunderstanding in the U.S.-Turkish relation due to the PKK. In October 1996, a U.S court declined to expel Kurdish activist Kani Xulam (Öcalans representative in the U.S.) on passport fraud charges. Instead he was sentenced to 400 hours of community service with the very PKK-associated office he had been heading in Washington D.C. Another event that shows that, despite the United States being Turkey’s friend and ally in the battle against the PKK, this Kurdish nationalist group has created some problems in their normally close relations.[[59]](#footnote-59)

**The effects of the PKK**

The violent measures used by the PKK in their struggle against the Turkish government were fairly successful from the late 1980s until the late 1990s. Their leader Öcalan created a guerilla army with political influence. This Kurdish nationalist movement were at some point supported by a large percentage of Kurds. With help from neighboring countries like Iraq, Syria and Iran Öcalan found and effective way to attract attention to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. At the time this support was abolished and Öcalan got arrested in 1999, the PKK quickly lost much of its indirect influence on Turkish politics.

The United States always supported the Turkish State instead of the PKK. By calling them a terrorist organization and convincing European nations to hand over Öcalan when he was on the run they clearly made a statement. Reasons for this are clear. The important geostrategic position and ally within the NATO weigh much more to the U.S. politicians than a minority organization that tries to accomplish its goal with violence like the PKK. America’s fear of Islamic fundamentalism and Turkey’s developing alliance with Israel contribute also to their strong anti-PKK policies. As mentioned before, the United States see Turkey as a “bastion” against Islamic fundamentalism and U.S. support of Israel has always been very important to the U.S.

These strong bonds between the U.S. and Turkey have been challenged by the PKK. In particular when the Kurdish cause gained sympathy during the 1990s. In the U.S. representative John Porter and his wife sympathized much with the PKK and the Turkish Kurds and tried to support them by criticizing the Turkish State for their way of dealing with human rights. This never had much success but led to misunderstanding and tension between the two allies. The same happened with the Turkish politicians that expressed deep concerns about the true meaning of Operation Provide comfort. Allegations that the U.S. secretly supported the PKK were never believed by the Turkish government, but did put some pressure on the good U.S.-Turkish relations.

When looking at the way both nations dealt with the arrestment of Öcalan, it is clear that the U.S. pressurized the international community to do Turkey a favor. In advantage the U.S. could keep on using Turkish air bases in their struggle against Saddam Hussein. The PKK has influenced the good U.S.-Turkish relations to a certain extent, but never enough to create a severe breach in their alliance.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**How the Iraqi Kurds influenced the U.S.-Turkish relation**

Examining the U.S. policy on the Iraqi Kurds compared to the Turkish Kurds is important because America makes a clear difference in the way they approach these two groups. As seen in the previous chapter, the U.S. often supported the Turkish government in their military actions against its Kurds. The Iraqi Kurds, on the other hand, could always count on U.S. backup during and right after the first Gulf War. When in the aftermath of this War 500.000 Iraqi Kurds fled from Saddam Hussein to refugee camps in Turkey (another million fled to Iran), an international coalition led by the U.S. protected the Iraqi Kurds for many years against Hussein. But when Turkey decided to start a large offensive against PKK militia in northern Iraq in 1995, U.S. officials did not criticize the Turkish government. This chapter will show the clear existing difference between Iraqi and Turkish Kurds to the United States.

**The Iraqi Kurds and the aftermath of the first Gulf War**

The Iraqi Kurds are nowadays the Kurds with most autonomy in the world. The first real changes just began after 1960 under the guidance of Mustafa Barzani. Until 1975 he fought for independence against Baghdad. In March 1970, Iraq came with a peace solution that involved more autonomy for the Kurds, but also meant that many Arabs were sent to Northern Iraq to manage the local oil reserves. This was not accepted by Barzani and the battle continued. In 1975, Iraq and Iran signed the Algiers-accords that included an agreement about less Iranian support for the Iraqi Kurds. Without this support, the Iraqi army could completely focus on the battle against the Kurds. During the five years after this accord, many Arabs were sent North and 200.000 Iraqi Kurds were deported.[[60]](#footnote-60)

When in 1980 the Iraq-Iran War started, the new president Saddam Hussein had to find a new way to battle the Kurds. The Iraqi army had to focus completely on the War against Iran. Husseins idea were the ‘Al Anfal’ actions. To discourage revolts entire Kurdish villages were bombed and exterminated. During the 1980s almost 200.000 Iraqi Kurds were killed and 4000 villages destroyed. Most famous is the town of Halabja. This village was bombed on march 18, 1988 with nerve gas. This resulted in 5000 people killed and 11.000 people wounded. In march 1991, just after the first Gulf War, the Kurds stop resisting and the North of Iraq was occupied by Husseins troops. Over one and a half million Kurds fled to other countries. Most of them headed for Turkey and Iran. On April 1st 1991 the United Nations (UN) to call in resolution 688 Iraq for humanitarian aid for those Kurds. This was the first time the Kurds are mentioned in an official document.[[61]](#footnote-61)

UN Resolution 688 made way for an international operation which became known as Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). During this operation massive amounts of humanitarian assistance was distributed to the refugees and they were helped prepare for repatriation. Because this was a very large operation, the military branch of OPC had grown by the end of May 1991 to more than 20.000 troops from eleven countries. The operation was supported by an air attachment deployed in Turkey near the Iraqi border to provide military cover for the operation and prevent Iraq from attacking the safe haven. At first, refugees were brought down from the Iraqi mountains to about 20 camps along the border. Between April and June almost a half million refugees returned from Turkey to Iraq. After the last camp closed in early June, the remaining 13.000 refugees were moved to a special camp in Silopi in Turkey.[[62]](#footnote-62) In July 1991, the military branch of OPC got smaller and troops were withdrawn from northern Iraq and moved to south-east Turkey. The goal of this “allied, multinational, rapid-reaction force” (briefly referred to as Operation Poised Hammer before being called Operation Provide Comfort II) was to prevent incursions by the Iraqi army into northern Iraq. In September 1991, the ground troops were removed and the air attachment of this rapid-reaction force moved to a NATO base in southeast Turkey. In 1992 a small Military Coordination Center was opened under the co-command of a U.S. and a Turkish colonel to observe military developments and supervise the work of non-governmental organizations (NGO’s).[[63]](#footnote-63)

The faith of the Iraqi Kurds finally turned in their favor after October 1991. When Hussein pulled his troops back from large parts of the Kurdish region a power vacuum emerged. The Kurdistan front, an alliance of different political parties, organized regional elections. Those were held at May 19, 1992 and many Kurds voted. International observers called those elections fair and democratic and this led to the formation of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The new government decided to stay part of Iraq and respect national laws (if this did not violate human or universal rights).

**Turkey’s dilemma**

Turkey was confronted with the incredibly difficult situation of almost half a million Kurdish refugees fleeing from Saddam Hussein to the Turkish border. Turkey dealt with this crisis by continuing its operation with the U.S.-led alliance against Saddam Hussein by hosting OPC and starting a de facto alliance with the emerging Iraqi Kurdish state and government in northern Iraq. These measures both meant big changes in Turkey’s traditional foreign policy of strict neutrality on the one hand and opposing any form of Kurdish nationalism on the other.[[64]](#footnote-64)

After this first months, the continuance of OPC became a major political issue in Turkey. Many Turkish politicians believed it was facilitating the vacuum of power in northern Iraq that made it possible for the PKK to act freely there. Some even thought that OPC meant the start of a new treaty of Sevres that would lead to the creation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. In the end, they thought that Turkey was facilitating its own destruction by hosting it. What added to these feelings was an accidental airdrop that resulted in allied supplies falling in the hands of the PKK. This led to further suspicions in the Turkish public, which was already irritated because of the presence of a foreign military force in the Turkish state.[[65]](#footnote-65)

On the other hand , there were various reasons why Turkey should protect and maybe even promote the Iraqi Kurds. First, if the Iraqi Kurds became dependent on Turkish aid, Turkey might be able to influence them and persuade them not to establish their own independent state. This would benefit Turkey because such a dependent Kurdistan in Iraq would definitely mean a bad example to the Turkish Kurds. Second, an unfriendly Iraqi Kurdish state might support the PKK, or even claim land in Turkey’s Kurdish region. It could even get better if Turkey supported the Iraqi Kurds and was able to influence them to be pro-Turkish. This might help them solving its own Kurdish problem faster. Another benefit of fighting the Iraqi government is that if Saddam Hussein attacks the Iraqi Kurds again, Turkey might be confronted with many destabilizing Kurdish refugees once more. Finally, being looked upon as the protector of the Iraqi Kurds would win Turkey respect and support in the West, and could even help becoming a member of the EU.[[66]](#footnote-66)

At the end of 1996, the Turkish Parliament renewed for another six months the mandate for a scaled-down OPC renamed the Surveillance Force or the Northern Watch. The renamed operation continued to enforce the no-fly zone over northern Iraq, but when the French no longer participated in it the relief role in northern Iraq was terminated. [[67]](#footnote-67)

**The United States, Turkey, Operation Provide Comfort and Iraqi and Turkish Kurds**

The first Gulf War changed some things in the U.S.-Turkish relation. Before the War America saw Turkey as a country to be reckoned with. Turkey is one of the few states in the world that has never been a major player since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire but has, next to its critical location between two continents, sufficient size, power, and economic potential to give the question about its strategic importance real relevance to American policymakers. It has not always been a perfect relationship and the U.S. government on many occasions tried to balance different, often conflicting, policy considerations. Nevertheless, every time U.S. is remembered to Turkey’s strategic importance and this has always stayed the dominant factor in American policy thinking on Turkey. This did not change per administration, conservative, liberal, Republican and Democratic administrations all acted alike. And Congress, on a few issues no supporter of Turkey, has generally accepted that conclusion.[[68]](#footnote-68)

The first Gulf War and the American military action afterWards against Saddam Hussein once again reminded U.S. officials to the major statement in official thinking about Turkey since the Second World War. Good relations with Turkey are of importance because of its political and strategic significance. The first Gulf War added the value of Turkish bases for operations against Iraq.[[69]](#footnote-69)

How, in the months after the War, Operation Provide comfort came to be is vividly described in the memoirs of the former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff Colin Powell:

“Nevertheless, we could not ignore the worsening plight of the rebellious Kurds in northern Iraq. Saddam had lashed back, driving over half a million of them from their homes to barren mountains in southern Turkey. There. Lacking food shelter, or medical care, they began dying at a rate of six hundred a day. President Bush directed us to launch a relief operation, Provide Comfort. (…) The Kurds, however, could not survive indefinitely in this bleak mountainscape. Their best hope was to return home. The challenge was to get them back while protecting them from Saddam’s vengeance.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

Derived from this quote by Powell the U.S. decided to undertake this operation, and support the Iraqi Kurds, based on its humanitarian aspect. Another important issue was the need to protect the Iraqi Kurds against Saddam Hussein. The following quote shows how Powell executed his mission after receiving orders from President George H.W. Bush:

“Jack Galvin, as our European commander, had long-distance control over our forces in this region. One Sunday afternoon he and I sketched out a “security zone,” a sector around Kurdish cities in Iraq that Saddam’s troops would not be allowed to enter. (…) After lining out the security zone, we ordered the Iraqi military to get out. They refused. We rattled the saber, and they withdrew. In seven weeks, Provide Comfort brought nearly half a million Kurds home.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

U.S. politicians always had to reckon with Turkish sensitivities with Iraq. Most of the time, America did not have many critique on Turkish actions against the Turkish Kurds and it’s PKK. This was also true with Turkish military actions in northern Iraq, even when they caused civilian casualties among the Iraqi Kurds.[[72]](#footnote-72) In March 1995, the Turkish army started an offensive in northern Iraq to fight the PKK. U.S. reaction on these attacks was much milder than the way European governments reacted to this. President Clinton declared that the operation had been necessitated by the PKK’s threat to Turkey’s security but stressed that the utmost care should be given to protect the civilian population. The United States also declared to Turkey that they should keep their cross-border operation short.[[73]](#footnote-73)

The American public and the press responded much more harsh. The New York Times columnist William Safire wrote that Turkey wanted to control petroleum facilities and occupy northern Iraq until Saddam Hussein’s forces could return to the area.[[74]](#footnote-74) The American press also claimed that innocent Iraqi civilians were suffering as a result of the Turkish operation.[[75]](#footnote-75) The Harshest criticism came from John Porter, the Republican Representative who was already mentioned in the previous chapter. At a meeting of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee, Porter argued that Turkey was even committing a genocide in Northern Iraq.[[76]](#footnote-76)

As seen by now, the relationship between Turkey and the United States is a diverse one. In their critique, U.S. Congress mainly focused on Turkey’s human rights violations and Turkey’s attempts to respond to the Kurdish insurgency by military means. According to the United States, the solution to the Kurdish question should include allowing the Kurds to express their ethnic and cultural identity. The State Department spokesman Marc Grossman also noted that the U.S. wanted the Turkish government to ensure ‘that the human and civil rights of the Kurds are protected, and indeed advanced’. He added: ‘We do not support autonomy for the Turkish Kurds within Turkey.’[[77]](#footnote-77) At the same time, the Clinton administration has once again emphasized Turkey’s strategic importance and also made attempts to improve the relation between Turkey and the U.S. Congress.[[78]](#footnote-78)

**The Turkish view on the Kurds in Operation Provide Comfort**

To the Turks the first Gulf War meant a bad economy and more international uncertainties. Because the Western allies created a protected zone in northern Iraq, this nation suddenly became an important topic in U.S.-Turkish relations. This allied operation arose from the plight of the Kurds and the need to protect Turkish President Turgut Özal against a political disaster if he allowed half million Iraqi Kurds in Turkey. The United States and its international coalition tried to prevent Saddam Hussein from fighting the Kurds with many air attacks above the protected area in northern Iraq. For this they needed the Turkish air bases. Operation Provide Comfort probably was one of the most prominent topics of U.S. policymaking toward Turkey during the 1990s.[[79]](#footnote-79)

As said before, many Turkish politicians thought that by starting this operation the United States tried to establish a Kurdish state in northern Iraq. It was hard for the Americans to deny this. On many occasions U.S. officials stressed to declare the fact that they respected Iraqi territory. It became even harder when the Iraqi Kurds created their own political entity in the north which received international aid from the U.S. and NGO’s. According to the Turks, the strong U.S. support for UN sanctions on Iraq resulted in many economic losses for Turkey. And they claim that these losses could lead to Kurdish uprisings within their own borders. [[80]](#footnote-80)

To remain good allies with the West, and particularly with the United States, Turkey needed to stay positive toward the Kurds in Northern Iraq. But its dilemma with their own Kurds, caused the Turkish government to prevent the Kurdish leaders in north Iraq from supporting the PKK. Ankara has also made many efforts to “ensure a regional and Western commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

**The influence of the Iraqi Kurds on the relationship between the United States and Turkey**

Turkey did not really like Operation Provide Comfort because it did not want an independent Kurdistan bordering their nation. On the other hand, it also did not want to be confronted with more Kurdish refugees. Even until the second half of the 1990s, United States officials had to make a “strenuous diplomatic effort” every six months when the parliament in Turkey reviewed and (hopefully) authorized a continuation of the allied operation. It is important to see that Turkey’s parliament voted every time in favor of the international operation. Surprising too, because after President Özal died in 1993, America and Turkey had different views on the Kurdish protected area in Iraq and on getting rid of Saddam Hussein. Turkey most of the time saw Hussein as the “ultimate obstacle against Iraq’s disintegration”. Important to Turkey because this could lead to the creating of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, which could have a bad influence on the Turkish Kurds.[[82]](#footnote-82)

The most important dilemma for the United States in this case was “how to reconcile its support for the Turkish fight against the PKK in northern Iraq with its concern for deteriorating human rights conditions in Turkey. Understandably, the administration was divided internally as how to approach this issue, and few missed the irony of the situation: while the United States was militarily protecting Iraqi Kurds, its ally, Turkey, was engaged in a campaign of repression against its own Kurds.”[[83]](#footnote-83) The U.S. government tried to justify this by critiquing Turkey’s behavior and its shortcomings on democratization. But when the U.S. saw an option to congratulate Turkey with improvements, no matter how small, America could not praise the Turks enough.[[84]](#footnote-84)

On the other side in Turkey people felt that they did not gain enough recognition for opposing Iraq and supporting OPC. A lot of Turks believed that the United States supported the Iraqi Kurds to create their own state, which eventually would claim Turkish lands too. This fear is so big among Turks, that even the loyal Turkish army is suspicious of U.S. actions, even regarding the fact that Turkey and the United States have been allies for over fifty years.[[85]](#footnote-85) “In an book authorized and published by the Turkish General Staff, Colonel Kocaoğlu observed that: ‘The U.S., under the pretext of protecting human rights, is assisting the formation of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq which eventually will demand land from Turkey.’ Kocaoğlu added that it was difficult to defeat the PKK because the PKK received support from the United States.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

When Turkish Prime minister Çiller visited the U.S. in April 1995 she emphasized once more to the officials that Turkey was ‘ the only secular democracy among 52 Muslim states’ and argued that the states in the Middle East had to choose between the ‘the Iranian model’ or ‘the Turkish model’ and it is therefore important to support Turkey in order to get more Middle Eastern states democratized. The prime minister continued and claimed that Turkey needed to fight terrorism, in Turkey or in Iraq, to protect the ‘Turkish model’ from fundamentalism. When she was talking, news arrived about the bomb explosion in Oklahoma City. This made her arguments more convincing when she said that the massive American effort to find the Oklahoma terrorist can be compared to sending 35.000 Turkish troops into northern Iraq. To end her speech, “she did promise that the cross border operation would end very soon and pledged that her government was committed to continue with democratization programs. She also added that the air corridor to Armenia, a highly sensitive issue in the United States, would be opened.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

When the Turkish military operation northern Iraq stopped in May 1995 the U.S. State Department spokesman announced with some relief that: “Prime Minister Çiller assured President Clinton and Secretary of State Christopher last April that the operation would be of limited scope and duration. She kept her word.”[[88]](#footnote-88) This did not change the fact that the Clinton administration and the Turkish government had very different views about the future of northern Iraq. The Unites States preferred a solution that would allow the Kurds in northern Iraq to enjoy autonomy in a federally restructured Iraq. A solution that became reality later on. Operation Provide Comfort and its successors were viewed by the U.S. officials as essential in order to drive Saddam Hussein’s forces back in their efforts to attack the Kurdish protected zone. The Turkish officials on the other hand were definitely in favor of a northern Iraq that eventually would come under the reign of Baghdad. The Turkish government viewed OPC as a temporary arrangement to make sure that the Iraqi forces do not prevent Kurdish refugees from fleeing. “After some years into the operation, Turkish officials seem to have reconciled themselves to the American idea of the northern Iraqi Kurds enjoying a form of autonomy within a unitary Iraq state.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

**The Iraqi Kurds as a factor in U.S.-Turkish relations**

The first Gulf War and the years after definitely influenced the relation between the United States and Turkey. Not so much during the War, when both countries collaborated to fight against Saddam Hussein, but when Iraq decided to occupy their Kurdish northern region many Kurds fled to Iran and Turkey. This led to a UN resolution that demanded help for those refugees. An American led international coalition then started Operation Provide Comfort. An operation that provided human aid for the Iraqi Kurds in Turkey and fought Hussein’s troops in northern Iraq. The catch of the operation was that it had to be reapproved by the Turks every six months.

This created two different dilemmas for the United States and Turkey. The situation caused U.S. policymakers to rethink their support for the Turkish state against its Kurds. To militarily defend the Iraqi Kurds, but not acting against Turkey’s human rights violation against the Turkish Kurds was contradictory and set straight the value of Turkey as an ally.

The Turkish dilemma also had to do with the difference in approach of the Iraqi Kurds compared to their own. They wanted to prevent at all cost that the Iraqi Kurds would establish their own independent state. Just like in their own nation, Kurds should have minimum authority and be part of the state. The biggest Turkish fear was that this Iraqi Kurdistan would finally claim Turkish lands. When Operation Provide Comfort started, the Turks became very suspicious of the operations long term means. They claimed that America’s final goal was to make sure such an independent Kurdish state could become reality. This was heavily denied by the U.S. officials, but not immediately believed by the Turks.

Turkey finally did see any advantages in helping the Iraqi Kurds. The biggest positive was the opportunity to influence those Kurds in being more pro-Turkey and not establishing and independent state.

In U.S. Turkish relations this situation with northern Iraq made officials from both nations to work together intensively for more than a decade. The United States needed Turkey to execute their operations against Saddam Hussein in protecting the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey wanted the U.S. to be a loyal ally that supports most actions of the Turkish government. U.S. critique on Turkey’s human rights violations against its own Kurds in Turkey and northern Iraq was mild. While European leaders on the other hand were much harsher in their judgment. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the U.S. roughly got their way when looking at the current position of the Iraqi Kurds. For the Turkish Kurds not much has changed during the 1990s. The U.S.-Turkish relation gained a new dynamic over the Iraqi Kurds, but just like in the situation with the PKK, the United States chose a loyal ally above minority rights for Kurds in Turkey.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**How the second Gulf War and changing Turkish politics on the Kurds influenced U.S.-Turkish relations**

The previous chapters showed that the Kurdish issue in Turkey had its influence on the relation between the United States and Turkey during the 1990s. The two main situations when the Turkish Kurds became an important factor in U.S.-Turkish relations before the second Gulf War had either to do with their own active militant struggle or because of the contrast with the Iraqi Kurds after the first Gulf War. After 2003, two major events caused a change in the relation between the two countries. First the second Gulf War that showed that both countries are not afraid to take opposite stands. This War defined the Iraqi Kurds as American allies and increased the tension between Turkey and its Kurds. Then there was the emergence of the *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (AKP), the Justice and development party in Turkey that formed the government after November 2002. A pro-Islamist party with a different policy towards the Turkish Kurds than its secular predecessors. Both events influenced the U.S.-Turkish relations to some extent.

**The second Gulf War and the emergence of the AK party**

The second Gulf War and the emergence of the AK party in Turkey also affected the Turkish Kurds during the last decade. The build-up to the second Gulf War second Gulf War began after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The United States showed many signs that they were about to invade Iraq and this was also noticed in Turkey. The Turkish Prime Minister in July 2002, Bulent Ecevit, Warned the United states that it faced a long War if it decided to topple Saddam Hussein by force. He said that Turkey publicly opposed U.S. military intervention. In a television interview he noted that: ”President Bush is a friend of Turkey. We do not want to hurt his feelings, but it is our duty to make our concerns known.” [[90]](#footnote-90)

The most important reason for the Turks to oppose this upcoming War, was the fact that they were still upset about the consequences of the first Gulf War. The Turkish government felt that it had cost Turkey millions of dollars in lost trade. The other major reasons have to do with the Kurds. Turkey also fears this new War would encourage the Iraqi Kurds to establish an independent state, and this could lead to a new guerilla War in Turkey. Besides, the last thing Turkey wanted was a repetition of the refugee drama right after the first Gulf War, when Turkey had to deal with a half million Iraqi Kurdish refugees.[[91]](#footnote-91)

In October 2002, Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit underscored the governments deep concerns about Kurdish nationalism in an interview in Hürriyet, a Turkish daily. “Many steps have already been taken toward the establishment of a separate state,” he said. “Turkey cannot accept this to be taken further.” At that time, Turkey urged the Bush administration to restrict the rights and territory granted Iraqi Kurds in any future Iraqi government, arguing for example, that Iraq’s northern oil fields should be kept out of Kurdish hands. Many Turkish Kurds on the other hand, keep saying that the situation in northern Iraq is totally different from the tension in Turkey and that Ecevit’s government simply wants to avoid giving them more cultural and political rights.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Internationally Turkey aims for a zero-problem policy. This means that they try to avoid conflicts internationally and regionally.[[93]](#footnote-93) President Bush noticed this when he asked Turkey for support during the second Gulf War. The United States wanted to use air bases and ground weapons in southeast Turkey to fight Iraq from there. The government of the new prime-minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declined this at the last moment, taking an important stand against their NATO-ally. The fact that Erdoğan limits its support for the United States, caused that both Turkish and American officials announced in March 20, 2003, that Turkey would not receive a package of at least 6 Billion USD in new aid that the United States had offered. The aid was tied to full military cooperation, and those officials said it would be either scaled back substantially or eliminated.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The decision to deny the support of American troops with the upcoming War against Iraq really emphasized the AKP’s position towards the United States. This pro-Islamic Justice and Development party gained a major victory in the national elections of November 2002 and was an off-shoot of the Islamic Welfare party which was banned in 1997. The AKP won 34,4 percent of the votes an 363 out of 550 seats in parliament. With such a majority it could form a single party government.[[95]](#footnote-95)

The AK party was not as harsh in their policy towards the Kurds as their predecessors, the military and secular governments, have been. An important reason for the large victory of the AKP was that they presented themselves as an anti-establishment party. Their pro-Islamic statements appealed to the Islamic Turkish population and the Kurds. Especially since they put a lot of effort campaigning in the Kurdish provinces of southeast Turkey. The AKP also stressed that it opposed the official state ideology of strong secularism and pointed out that both Kurds and Islamic groups had been “marginalized and oppressed by the Kemalist state ideology.”[[96]](#footnote-96)

As soon as the new government came into power, it’s main goal was to become a member of the EU as soon as possible. Therefore they started a reform program to meet the EU’s membership criteria. Many of those reforms are directly related to the Kurdish issue and this is why the Turkish Kurds strongly support Turkey’s possible EU membership. In a survey from 2002, 64 percent of the Kurds would vote in favor.[[97]](#footnote-97) Some policies changed in favor of the Kurds. The legal regulation of torture was vastly improved, restrictions on freedom of expression and association were lessened and prohibitions on Kurdish language broadcasting and teaching were theoretically lifted.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In 2005, the reform process slowed down considerably. This was partly due to the PKK who broke its unilateral cease-fire in 2004 and began fighting against the Turkish state again. The situation in southeast deteriorated because of the increased number of PKK attacks and rising Turkish nationalism. In a speech in Diyarbakir (southeast Turkey) in 2005, Prime Minister Erdoğan promised to handle the Kurdish question with increased democracy rather that military force. This statement was received with much enthusiasm among the Turkish Kurds. But this joy did not last long and after a cease-fire of a month violations started again. Meanwhile the AK party government was under pressure from the military to not give in to the ‘terrorists’ and this is why Erdoğan changed his tone about the Kurdish issue.[[99]](#footnote-99) He now declared that “the security forces would intervene against the pawns of terrorism, no matter if they are women or children.”[[100]](#footnote-100)

The invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 changed many things for Turkish foreign policy makers. First there was the fact that Turkey was now governed by the AK party, a party with Islamic roots. This caused a great deal of unease among the traditional secular military and civilian elite. Second, they had to deal with the transformation of Iraq. The situation with the Iraqi Kurds go either way. Or they could integrate completely into a central Iraqi state, or the Kurds could go for total independence. Or anything in between.[[101]](#footnote-101) This is why Turkish foreign policy after 2003 was totally different than during the 1990s. A situation that had its effect on American policy towards Turkey as well.

**Views on the Kurdish situation in Turkey after the invasion of Iraq in 2003**

After the Turkish election of November 2002, President George W. Bush made an official visit to Ankara on December 10th, where he spoke with the new Turkish Prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In this visit Bush declared that he was a strong supporter of the possible Turkish membership to the EU. He said that “the U.S. sees Turkey as a potential role model for other predominantly Muslim countries, and believes its embrace of secular democracy should be reWarded and encouraged by EU membership.”[[102]](#footnote-102)

Erdoğan and his government were very happy with this open American support. They hoped that Bush’s statements could influence European governments and ease their accession to the EU. The American government however, did not give its public blessing without a reason. With a War against Iraq in view, Turkey’s sympathy could be won with statements like these. The U.S. knew that having Turkey as an ally in this War could make the operation much easier. Unfortunately for the Bush administration, the Turkish government did not change its views on this War and refused to give its support.[[103]](#footnote-103)

This Turkish position was a big disappointment to all Americans. Republican political columnist William Safire wrote in the New York Times about the American views on this decision. He wrote:

“After dickering about an entry fee, its [the Turkish, red.] new Islamist government refused the U.S. request for transit of our troops to start a northern front in Iraq. Such an operation would have shortened the War, saved lives and made Turkey a partner in extending freedom throughout the Middle East. Then the Turks added insult to injury. Turkey’s military in threatening to grab northern Iraq’s rich oil fields if the Kurds, recently ejected from the area by Saddam Hussein, dare to return to their stolen homes in Kirkuk.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

The Turkish rejection clearly hurt American feelings about their loyal ally Turkey. Describing the actions as ‘injury’ and ‘insult’ shows how betrayed the Americans must have felt. OutWards, American politicians acted like this surprising Turkish stand made no difference to the relation between the two countries. According to Safire this does not matter, because to the American people, harm is already done:

“Secretary of State Colin Powell was in Ankara this week , pouring soothing syrup, pretending the political betrayal does not affect our ‘strategic partnership.’ (…) But trust is shot. With our ships laden and tanks offshore, Turkey suddenly embraced neutralism. Generations of Americans with memories of gallant Turks fighting alongside us in the Korean War –and saving refugees after the first Gulf War- are being replaced by a generation that will remember the slamming of Turkey’s door in our faces.”[[105]](#footnote-105)

Because of this new situation, the U.S. turned to their other ally in search for regional support: the Iraqi Kurds. These Kurds welcomed the Americans with open arms, and supported them in every way possible. They even made their own troops, the *Peshmerga*, available to fight alongside American forces.

One of Turkey’s main concerns after the invasion of Iraq was that the Iraqi Kurds would become the closest ally of the United States in the Middle Eastern region. The overwhelming support of the Iraqi Kurds and the opposition by the Turkish government increased those feelings. The Former Turkish President Süleyman Demirel said in a Turkish newspaper that although he did not believe that the U.S. would let the Iraqi Kurds establish their own state, he did think that the U.S. had to give them something in return for their support. Therefore, since the reconstruction of a new Iraq began, the Kurds have been engaged in intense negotiations over how much autonomy they will have in the future Iraq.[[106]](#footnote-106)

The United States and the Iraqi Kurds always said to be in favor of a unified Iraq.[[107]](#footnote-107) The Turks were, as always, very skeptic about this but had to realize that the new President of Iraq was a Kurd. Although many things have changed since 2003 on a political and regional level, Turkish policy towards Iraq still contains some major pillars. Erdoğan and his AK-party still want a unified and sovereign Iraq and try to prevent Kurdish independence.[[108]](#footnote-108)

The last decade, Turkey has not done much more for its Kurds than they did right after the 2002 elections. The limited concessions in the field of cultural and linguistic rights has not been expanded. Despite this, the Turks did manage to get away with it because the EU and the United States did not push the issue. The optimism of the Turkish Kurds towards a better future in 2002 has gone, especially now the EU and Turkey do not seem that eager to take the next steps in their accession procedure.[[109]](#footnote-109)

**The changed U.S.-Turkish relation after the second Gulf War**

Because of the second Gulf War and Turkey’s new political path the relation between the United States and Turkey has changed since 2002. Especially the lack of support from Turkey’s side, support that the U.S. expected to get, created a deep feeling of distrust on the American side. Turkish politicians may not have realized how the impact of this decision was in the U.S., although they recognized the fact that it did affect their relationship. “Those two countries are strong partners, “ said a senior Turkish government official after the decision was made. But, the official added: “If you there would be no impact on our relationship, that’s unrealistic. There is going to be a sort of mark, especially on the American side. They are more upset than we are.”[[110]](#footnote-110)

The motives behind this Turkish decision have primarily to do with their fear of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. When Saddam Hussein stayed in power, this would be the easiest way to prevent this from happening. According to Barham Salih, an Iraqi Kurdish leader from Sulaimaniya, Erdoğan had been advised that "America could, and would, not topple Saddam Hussein without Turkey. We do not forget that Turkey provided the airfields for the no-fly zone that protected Kurds for a decade.”[[111]](#footnote-111) This appeared to be a bad advice that eventually did more bad than good for the U.S.-Turkish relation.

William Safire called the renewed relation between the two countries “forgive but do not forget.” He described Turkey’s “paranoia” over the Iraqi Kurds a serious blunder, but admits that America has made a big mistake too by trusting on Turkey’s support solely based on the good relations in the past. Safire writes that U.S. officials “failed to grasp that the new Turkish government was run by political amateurs.” When some Turkish journalists and business leaders asked him: “So what if there were a few regrettable misunderstandings during a political transition, does this mean that it’s all over between us? You know we’re too proud to apologize, but it’s in the U.S. interest to work with the only secular democratic Muslim state that can be an example to the new Iraq” he answered that “actions must have consequences, and we cannot immediately go back to business as usual."[[112]](#footnote-112)

A big issue in Turkey has been the revival of the PKK in northern Iraq. Turkey often wanted to invade the northern regions to fight them themselves, but the NATO has repeatedly asked Turkey not to do this. Until now, Turkey has done this whilst hoping for American troops to deal with the PKK. Especially because the Iraqi Kurds, U.S.’s other ally, sees the PKK as a threat to the Kurdish cause. The fact that America has not done this so far, leads to anti-American feelings among Turks.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Turkey’s Prime Minister Erdoğan Warned President Bush in July 2006 that it was hard for him to sit down and do nothing while see the PKK kill Turkish soldiers. An important reason why Turkey did not invade Iraq had to do with several Warning from the EU, the organization they theoretically still want to join. Meanwhile in America, the debate was going on about which ally to support when such a thing would occur. “The self-described realists favor Turkey: the country is a tested ally and far bigger, richer and more powerful than today's fledgling Iraqi Kurdistan. The neoconservatives may favor holding on, at all costs, to the only solid ally within a federal Iraq, namely the Kurdish regional government. But the mood may recently have shifted in favor of the Turks. The Iraqi Kurds are not the angels they were made out to be, says an American official.”[[114]](#footnote-114)

According to Henri Barkey, an American expert on the Kurds who served in the State Department during the Clinton administration, America’s response would depend on the extent of the Turkish operation and how far it would penetrate into Iraq. If America does not want to lose both allies “it might be best to cut a deal between the Turks and the Iraqi Kurds, with a plan that takes care of the PKK in return for cultural and political rights for the Turkish Kurds.” Some members of the Bush administration do not agree and prefer support for the Turks in order to keep at least one important ally.[[115]](#footnote-115)

America’s standpoint on the AK party and its leader Erdoğan remain unchanged to the outside world. Although the party is from Islamic descent and is therefore less secular than previous Turkish governments, the U.S. supports the Turkish state as always.[[116]](#footnote-116) Being critical at Turkey’s policies seldom happens directly, unlike within the EU, but takes an indirect form. For example, as seen before it is clear that the U.S. firmly supports Turkey’s possible accession to the EU. One of the reasons it does this is because the criteria the EU has for accession are important to the U.S. as well. The human rights violations against Turkish minorities like the Kurds is one of the important issues and an improvement in this situation might eventually lead to less tension and a solution for the Kurdish problem. America does not like to criticize Turkey for dealing with its Kurds, but by supporting the EU it indirectly does.

Because the AK party made it their most important goal to get Turkey into the EU they opposed the Kurds less than former more secular governments. They addressed the Kurds as fellow-Muslims instead of ‘mountain Turks’. Election after election this new approach appealed to the Kurds and made the AK party popular in the southeast of Turkey. As the EU accession took more years, tension between the Kurds and the Turkish state grew and the amount of Kurdish support decreased.[[117]](#footnote-117)

With the elections of June 12, 2011 the situation changed. The two main parties, next to the AK party the biggest opposition Republican People’s Party, or CHP, traded places concerning the Kurds. In order to attract more nationalist voters, the AK party appeared cool towards the Kurds. Prime Minister Erdoğan even said that “there is no Kurdish issue but problems of Kurdish people.” The CHP on the other hand, ignored by most Kurds over the last decade because of its policies of denying their concerns, has meanwhile enjoyed a boost from its new leader’s bolder rhetoric on the issue.[[118]](#footnote-118) This shift in Kurdish voters did not have its result on the outcome of the elections. The AK party won its third term with a clear victory and looks set to remain in power for years to come.[[119]](#footnote-119)

**A decade of change**

The emergence of the pro-Islamic AK-party just before the start of the second Gulf War meant a different relation between the United States and Turkey in the 21st century. Small commitments for the Turkish Kurds and a lot of freedom for the Iraqi Kurds resulted from a period in which the United States and Turkey collided more than ever before. The last-minute cancellation of expected support in the War against Iraq clearly hurt American feelings towards their ally. Turkish fear of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq that would inspire Turkish Kurds took the upper hand and the new Turkish government preferred a dictator like Saddam Hussein who suppressed its Kurds above uncertainty.

When the U.S. appeared to be able to topple Saddam Hussein without Turkey, but with help of their ‘new best friend’ the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey was afraid American sympathy completely transferred in favor of the Kurds. Especially when those Kurds got an important role in governing the new Iraqi state. Both the United States officials and the Iraqi Kurds claimed that an unified Iraq was their objective. A message that was received with skepticism in Turkey.

Meanwhile the new Turkish government had its mind set on joining the EU. To accomplish this, many things had to change, including their way of treating the Turkish Kurds. Some small concessions did not mollify the Kurds and after 2005 violence returned in the Kurdish battle for freedom. The PKK attacked Turkey from northern Iraq and Turkey had a hard time not invading their neighbor to fight back. Officially they managed to do this better than during the 1990s, when they crossed the border frequently.

Within the U.S. government debates followed about the importance of keeping Turkey as an ally or choosing the Iraqi Kurds in case of a clash between the two. Despite the fact that America felt betrayed in 2003 by Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds assisted them during the second Gulf War, Turkey still appears to be in pole position for being its stable ally in an unstable region.

**Conclusion**

The Kurdish issue had an impact on the relationship between the United States and Turkey throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However, during this period the United States always made clear that they saw the Turkish state as an important ally and therefore supported their military actions against the PKK. Turkey’s geostrategic position and NATO membership were much more valuable to the U.S. than the alleged Turkish human rights violations against its Kurds. In contrast to European nations, that were much harsher in their critique.

The first case study shows that the strong alliance between the U.S. and Turkey has been challenged by the PKK. The violent measures that the PKK used to fight for Kurdish rights in Turkey until 1999 caused the Turkish government to take a harsh stand towards these ‘terrorists’. The leader of the PKK , Abdullah Öcalan, made his guerilla army fairly successful and in the process gained considerable support within the Kurdish community. This lasted until Turkey pressured their neighboring countries to give up their support for the PKK and Öcalan. After his arrest in 1999, the PKK and the Kurdish cause in Turkey quickly became a less important point on the U.S.-Turkish agenda.

Some American officials gained sympathy for the Kurdish cause, but their attempts to pressure Turkey never had much success. The situation with the PKK did lead to some misunderstanding and tension between the two allies when Turkish politicians suspected the U.S. of supporting the PKK. This had no severe consequences for the U.S.-Turkish relation, but did at times complicate it. Looking back on the period when the PKK was active and fairly successful however, it never managed to influence the alliance enough to create a real change. Turkey’s just was too important as a geostrategic ally to have concerns about the struggle of Turkish Kurds.

Another moment when the U.S. government had to take a stand towards the Turkish Kurds was after the first Gulf War. During this War both nations fought together to get Saddam Hussein’s army out of Kuwait, but right after this was done the Iraqi army occupied their northern region to fight against the Kurds. This caused many Kurds to flee towards the Turkish and Iranian border. In this period after the first Gulf War, the American led Operation Provide Comfort started to help the Kurdish refugees who stayed in Turkish camps.

This situation caused the U.S. to reevaluate the importance of Turkey as an ally and look at the contradiction in their actions towards the Iraqi and Turkish Kurds. U.S. criticism of Turkey’s human rights violations against its own Kurds in Turkey and northern Iraq again was mild. While European leaders on the other hand were much harsher in their judgment. For Turkey another dilemma arose. Why should they even help the Iraqi Kurds while they might influence the Turkish Kurds in their fight for independence. Fear of an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan finally lost to the disadvantages of keeping the international community happy and possibly even influence the Iraqi Kurds in not establishing an independent state. The relationship between the U.S. and Turkey changed a bit over the Iraqi Kurds in the 1990s, but just like in the situation with the PKK, the United States chose a loyal ally above more rights for the Turkish Kurds.

The eventual change in the relationship between Turkey and the United States caused by the Kurdish issue in Turkey is minor during the 1980s and 1990s. The PKK, the first Gulf War and the refugee support operation that followed led to tension and misunderstanding between both nations, but had no lasting effect on their alliance. In this period, the United States supported the actions of the Turkish state towards its ‘terrorist’ Kurds.

However, after the Turkish elections of 2003, the AK party’s new policies did result in a major breach of trust. The Turkish lack of support for the upcoming second Gulf War severely scarred the relationship. America’s rapprochement to the Iraqi Kurds on the other hand frightened Turkey and increased their fear of an independent Kurdistan that would make territorial claims on Turkey’s southeastern region.

The Turkish Kurds fought for more Kurdish rights in Turkey but faced a highly secular state that does not allow its minorities to be anything else than Turks. The PKK gained support for their battle, but never managed to accomplish any of their goals. Every political party that had alleged contacts with the PKK was banned and therefore their situation did not change much during the 1980s and 1990s. The only minor result was the fact that they got noticed more than ever in countries outside Turkey.

An aspect that is very troubling for the Turks is that the Iraqi Kurds had a successful period after the first Gulf War. With support of an American led coalition they fought against Saddam Hussein and became slightly autonomous. After the second Gulf War the Iraqi Kurds were America’s favorite Iraqi and therefore occupied many important positions within the new Iraq.

With this situation the United States an Turkey could face different dilemma’s. For the U.S., Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds are both allies in a sensitive region. The problem is that they do not get along very well. In the period after the second Gulf war, the United States had better relations with the Iraqi Kurds than with the Turks. But regarding the history of U.S.- Turkish relations, the Turks will remain America’s closest ally. The dilemma could rise when those two parties get into conflict. Even though the U.S.-Turkish relationship got damaged since the second Gulf War, it is still likely that they will get America’s support in such a situation.

The United States has always preferred the alliance with Turkey above rights for Turkish Kurds. Especially when this group was using violence with the PKK they were marked as ‘terrorist’ and therefore “bad”. In other words, the PKK made it much easier for the U.S. to choose for the Turkish state. The Iraqi Kurds on the other hand were always supported in their battle against Saddam Hussein and were therefore marked as ‘allies’ and “good’” Kurds. They were seen as victims of the Iraqi regime and not as offenders like the Turkish Kurds. It must therefore be said that Gunter’s theory about “good” and “bad” Kurds is a valid one.

In the future much depends on the situation of Iraq. When this nation remains unified and the Kurds do not get their own state, Turkey will have to accept this new situation. In another scenario when the Iraqi Kurds do become fully independent, the Turkish government might take action to prevent this new state from including the Turkish Kurds. This possible action would lead to an American reaction that could severely influence the U.S.-Turkish relation.

For the Turkish Kurds not much will change in the near future. After the recent elections and the victory of the AK party many Kurds feel like in the 1990s. The rise of PKK related violence will therefore still make the news in the upcoming years. Their renewed struggle is not likely to have any result and will probably victimize many Kurds and Turks. Despite this given they will not give up, because their quest for freedom is part of Kurdish identity. This fact, and the likelihood that Iraq’s Kurds will retain a considerable degree of influence and autonomy for the foreseeable future, means that the Kurdish question will continue to complicate U.S.-Turkish relations.

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