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WEBINAR

RELATIONS WITH TURKEY UNDER TRUMP 2.0

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Good morning, everyone. Good morning. My name is Aslı Aydintaşbaş. I'd like to welcome you all on behalf of Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution. We're here to discuss relations with Turkey under a new Trump administration. Turkish-American relationship. As the world gets more disorderly by the day and the countdown starts for a new Trump administration, this is a very, very important topic, especially since we've seen the downfall of the Syrian regime, the 50-year, 50-year tyranny of the Assad family only days ago. And we are still 40 days away from a second Trump administration.

Turkish US relations. I will not go into the details of the ups and downs and the drama and the particular issues that we are going to be talking about. If you have logged on and are here, you probably have a sense of what S-400s is, what CATSA is. What US alliance with Syrian Kurdish group SDF means in the relationship and so on. So all sticking points that we're going to be discussing. But Donald Trump's return to the White House offers both possibilities and challenges to rethink in both capitals about their approach to this relationship. What would a recalibration look like? What is it going to look like? What should it look like? We are here to discuss all this with really an excellent team of speakers. Rich Outzen, Nick Danforth and Evren Balta. All three of you have contributed to a recent compendium of essays on Turkish-American relationship that we have published on our website. It's part of a Brookings project on Turkey solving Washington's Turkey conundrum. I encourage you all to go online and read these excellent essays and also read the essays by two other contributors who are not on this panel today, but will be part of our future events. Halil Karaveli and Alan Makovsky. Let me quickly introduce our guests today and then jump into the conversation. Don't worry, we will be talking about Syria as well and sort of do a bit of a stocktaking on where things are in other parts of the relationship. But I'm going to start with Rich Outzen. He's a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council. Rich is a retired colonel in the US Army and a former State Department official under the first Trump administration. Evren Balta is joining us from Boston. She's a professor of political science at the Özyeğin University in Istanbul. But this year she is a visiting fellow at the Better Heads, visiting fellow at Harvard. Everyone's work is, of course, on Turkish foreign policy, populism and domestic dynamics. And we have our friend Nick Danforth with us. He's one of Washington's prominent Turkey experts, a fellow right now at the Century International and, of course, the author of a very interesting book, *The Remaking of Republican Memory, Memory and Modernity Since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire*. Now, first question I'm going to ask each of you to give me your theory of the case on Turkish US relations, meaning it Very briefly, I'd like you to sum up what you argued in your opening essay for our compendium. What is your thesis? Where can there be a reset? Where is this relationship going? What should we wait? Whatever aspect of it. You want to tackle the flaws. The floor is yours, everyone.

**BALTA:** Thank you all. So thank you for inviting me and thank you for bringing us together to discuss Turkish-American relations. And when we were writing this, it was quite different than today. And we were talking this morning. It has become a bit outdated, the contributions in the pace of the events. But very briefly, what I emphasize in my essay, short essay is the loss of trust between Turkey and the United States, which has been an issue that has been I mean, it has been the talk of the town, but it has been really quite addressed in terms of what it means, the loss of trust and can it be rebuilt. So I was basically trying to identify some of the mechanisms, why there was a loss of trust and identify three mechanisms. In fact, the first one was it was the pace of the events. As we are basically witnessing right now, events move faster than the ability to form a new type of relationship. Syrian crisis as far as Turkey and Russia are approaching and Gaza crisis diverging paths and into that. So you have all these problems. And the second one is basically normative differences, which is really important in building trust, where you have democratic backsliding in Turkey, but not just that, also civilizational anti-Western, this anti-Americanism specifically after 2016. And the third aspect that I focus is the institutionalization both inside Turkey personalization and centralization of authority, but also declining importance of multilateral institutions, institutions. And these are I mean, not just happening in Turkey, but it's systemic and structural. So what we have now is a more transactional relationship. And so I was asking whether this week Turkish-American relations in the Turkish-American relations, can the trust be rebuilt? And I'm saying that some of the more systemic normative aspect could be rebuilt with different actors, but the other factors are going to be remaining with us. And we need to find or Turkey, Ankara and Washington need to find a different form of engagement in order to fill the void of of trust.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** It's always good to start off with a political scientist because you've laid out structure in a very systematic way. The structural issues, including, of course, this narrative that you highlighted, the anti the civilizational divide narrative, which is very prevalent in Turkey, people very consciously talking about a different civilizational order than the sort of the transatlantic or the Western led order that Turkey been part of. So, Nick, maybe to you and then, Rich, how what is your theory of the case, how the Biden administration approached the relationship with Ankara? Reset. No reset.

**DANFORTH:** Thank you so much. Great to be on here with all of you. Thank you for an opportunity to speak about this in what Evren rightly said is a slightly different regional environment from the one in which we started writing these papers. My argument that I made in the paper and would still maintain in spite of

whatever has happened since then, is that for the better part of the last decade, it feels like the debate in Washington over US Turkish relations has been between those who think we can rebuild a stronger, more cooperative relationship by being more accommodating of Erdogan and those who think we can rebuild a stronger, more cooperative relationship by being more punitive towards Erdogan and people who say, you know, we solve this problem with sticks, we solve this problem with carrots. I would say the position I've been I've tried to articulate in my paper and I'll try to lay out today is that I think given the changes that have taken place in Turkey, the ideological and strategic view governing Turkish foreign policy, now some of the factors that have been laid out as well, but neither of these strategies are likely to be particularly effective. You know, it will be interesting to see which ones get pursued by the Trump administration. I'm sure we can talk more about this. Rich has been one of the most eloquent advocates of taking a more accommodating approach to Ankara. I'm sure he'll lay out the case for that. There's certainly a lot of people who've been pushing for a much more punitive approach to Ankara. We've seen and we've seen them prominently featured among the folks that have been discussed for prominent Cabinet positions in the Trump administration. So it will be interesting to see. And again, it'll be interesting to hear what Rich has to say about how these divergent impulses are likely to play out in the administration in the coming administration. My view, again, would be neither of these are going to and they might get some results. Both of these approaches might get some results in the short term. There's a place for both of these approaches, but realistically. Turkish foreign policy, the Turkish government's worldview is not in a place where the United States can have a cooperative relationship with Turkey. It doesn't mean the Turkey isn't an enormously important country. I think all of us here believe that. It doesn't mean that in the abstract it wouldn't be better for the United States to have a healthy, productive relationship with Turkey. It simply means that right now that is not a realistic goal of US foreign policy. The email talk much more about this as well. But right now, you have a Turkish government that's been very consistent on saying it wants to pursue a more independent and balanced foreign policy. You have a Turkish government that has been very insistent that it no longer wants to be beholden to the United States, which is how it sees its historic relationship with Washington. You have a Turkish government, a Turkish president that's been very explicit in saying the biggest threats to Turkey over the past half century have come from the United States and NATO. And you have a Turkish president and an entire cadre of people in Ankara who've been equally insistent that the decline of American and Western power and the transition to a more multipolar world is what's going to make Turkish foreign policy successful in the near future. So I think against that backdrop, you know, we can discuss what the best way to manage this relationship is, But I think we should be very candid that we're managing a relationship that isn't going to get any better than it's been for the past decade.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Okay, Rich, I think you have a task set out for yourself, as Nick suggested. It felt to me, to me and to many of our readers that the two essays, one by Nick and one by you were sort of like counter arguments. And Nick also has hinted that, as he says, there is a school of thought that has a more punitive approach towards Turkey and then a school of thought in Washington that is more inclined to make this work and sort of offer incentives for a reset. Tell us your theory of the case and your argument on the relationship.

**OUTZEN:** Well, first, great honor to be here with you and with these distinguished colleagues and well, stating and re-emphasizing my my deep affection for Nick. I have to take issue with the characterization of me as someone favoring accommodation. I, I'll get to what I argued in my, my piece, but I basically think it's a false dilemma to say accommodation. And and maybe Nick and I agree on this that a carrot or a stick, neither is going to be the right way. And I think it's actually the wrong way to to conceive of the relationship with Turkey. Unfortunately, that's about all the bandwidth Washington has. And most of the tools people who argue with engage against engagement with Turkey are not arguing against me or others who know the Turks and would like to stay engaged with the Turks. They're arguing against history and geography because the idea that we somehow can pursue our interests in the Mediterranean, in the Caucasus, in the Black Sea, Ukraine, Syria, without serious engagement with the Turks, and that means not all sticks. It means listening. First and foremost, the first task of statecraft should be to listen and to understand context. And I think we've done a bad job of that. But people kind of have this misreading, I think, of the context. There was perhaps a very brief period of time in the 90s when we had a very sort of compliant turkey, even even that's an exaggeration. But the Turkish compliance, as the junior partner in our relationship, has generally come about in very at times of very great weakness and instability in the Turkish state. Every other time they've been difficult. And if you look at 1958, if you like, look in the 1960s, look in 1974, there are very few times and frankly, you know, 2003 onward, Turkey is always a difficult ally for the United States. And thank God we're allies because that keeps us in the formal treaty sense from ever slipping into true enmity because there's been voices on both sides that would like to do that or it would be inclined to. But the title of my piece is to bring Turkish US Relations In from the Cold. And by that, it's not it's not the anger, the acrimony, the disagreements. I think those are actually quite natural within this relationship. It's this very odd approach of saying, let's not engage at all, which marks the Biden administration's approach, frankly, for the first six months to 12 months, really until February 2022. No. Well, the way things got better, I want to give the Biden administration some credit for sort of pragmatically adapting after the flare up of the Russian invasion in Ukraine. They appointed a very good ambassador and Jeff Flake. They pursued a strategic

mechanism to engage at the sub head of government level. There were some things like co-production of artillery ammunition that were really a sea change from where we were five years ago, eight years ago, ten years ago. But but still, there are breaks that are slowing any potential momentum in the relationship on both sides and the institutionalization. Pick up the theme from everyone's piece. Actually, in my view, is not a bad thing because the institutions on both sides are those breaks. So there's enough people in the United States Congress and the Department of State, in the Department of Defense and in Washington policy elites in general that have an antipathy towards Turkey. And by the way, that's mirrored very much by antipathy towards the United States in Ankara, that if we leave it to the institutions, there will be no progress. The status quo of a pretty low equilibrium in relations will pertain. Now. Why must we engage? Why is this low equilibrium not a good thing? Well, it's because the world has changed dramatically since the 1990s, and we're no longer dealing with a compliant turkey because of weak Turkey. What we have is a turkey who has had continuity of government. Like it or dislike it under Erdogan for quite some time. Which means the consistency of foreign policy and the ability to develop relationships with all the regional players and to pursue a policy even against public outcries. In some case, like what happened in Syria, to pursue a line in policy across five years, eight years, ten years, 12 years. Whereas Western governments are changing much more frequently and have seen a dramatic shifts of policy between, say, Obama and Trump and then again to Biden. So that's an advantage in terms of geography of Turkey. As people have said this for a long time, I think it's still true that the central location of Turkey with regards to Europe, Africa, energy, travel, trade routes, all of the conflict zones of interest to us means it's an indispensable partner. And again, whether it's a combination of carrots and sticks, however you negotiate it, you have to negotiate with Turkey if you're going to influence these areas. Third is that Turkey has great hedging options and whenever it is that the US does try to either work around Turkey, as it did with the Eastern Med Gas Forum or to do things against Turkey's interests and wishes, as it did in engaging with the YPG in Syria. Turkey has very good hedging options to partner with other countries that are not part of the West and its friends and thereby essentially exercise a veto on geo political or economic initiatives in its near area. Fourth, there's massive opportunity costs when we don't because again, Syria being a great example, if we don't engage with Turkey and they're exercising their hedging of options and their power projection, then they are be determinative of outcomes and we simply aren't. And all the thing this is again, we could talk more about Syria, but all the things that we've tried to do in Syria and the entire ends of US policy appear to be sort of falling apart as other actors are driving the bus. And it's not just there. It's been Ukraine, it's been the Caucasus has been Africa. And the opportunity cost us because there are some places where we really don't want to be that determinedly involved in Oslo. You and I have talked about this with regards to the South Caucasus, where

the US cares, but not probably enough to be the leading force. But Turkey is positioned in a place to do some good, both on economic projects like the middle economic corridor and a potential normalization between Azerbaijan and Armenia. And that's not the only place. There's places in Africa as well, Central Asia, where that good can be done as a result of US and Turkish partnering. But by keeping the arm's length, the Heisman treatment, as we call it, what we're doing is we're just we're missing opportunities to serve both countries national interests. And then finally, great power competition. If you look at US Turkish relations in a vacuum, there's lots to be irritated by. There's lots to be angered by and there's lots to prompt a punitive approach from Washington. And that is our sort of responsive mode, our natural mode. But this is not a relationship that exists in a vacuum. In fact, Iran is a player in the area. Russia is a player in the area. I'm watching with interest now as we're seeing reports that Russia might not actually leave its bases in Syria as the new Syrian government is saying, well, let's talk. We're not sure the Russians have to go at all. And I think when the Israelis and the American air forces are bombing targets in in Syria and basically saying, we're not sure about the legitimacy of this new government, of course, and the new Syrian government and its supporters in Ankara are going to say, we better keep all of our options open here. So all of that is to say, I think I'll just finish with this. Personal diplomacy and personal leadership in this relationship matters a ton. I'm encouraged by the fact that President Trump not only has said some things that will tickle the Turkish ears, so to speak, and indicate that there is trade space, but he's also appointed a trusted political nominee for to be the new ambassador in Ankara, someone with deep political experience with Trump and therefore good access and also a businessman, somebody who is worth reportedly \$700 million and will be looking for ways to increase trade and find positive transactional relationships. So I'll.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Can you announce the name? Because we know that President elect Trump has just announced a candidate, a name for.

**OUTZEN:** Tom Barrack.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Tom Barrack.

**OUTZEN:** Who's ethnic Lebanese. I mean, his family's roots are in Lebanon. He was a businessman in Los Angeles area. He's been a very effective fundraiser for the Trump campaign. Fluent in Arabic, he knows the region reasonably well. And so, Tom, Tom Barrack is the nominee.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Okay. So you've said a number of very interesting things that are I don't want to get into polemical saying among our speakers, you know.

**DANFORTH:** That's the best part of these panels.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** We will you agree on some issues and disagree on some, For example. Everyone has said institutional relationship. Rich is saying forget institutional. You know, we kind of need personalized diplomacy at this point. All of these things are very, very interesting. As part of this dynamic, I want to sort of test. I want to go back Rich and then Nick and then Evren because, Rich, your framework engagement idea. I'm obviously very sympathetic to you and I spoke about it, but the framework you have describe. As it worked perfectly well during the first Trump administration. In other words, there are really very many ups and downs. I mean, what do you say to that? And when I talk to people in Ankara, I think there's no denying that they preferred a Trump administration over a continued Biden administration, where there was sort of a very clear, cold shouldering of Turkey, even though some institutional efforts, etc.. But is. But on the other hand, they are also worried about the ups and downs in the relationship that would be similar to what they've seen too, between 2016 and 2020.

**OUTZEN:** Well, for sure. I mean, the timing factor of the first Trump administration needs to be looked at as well, though. So I think Trump basically wants to have a good relationship with Turkey. Obviously, he's not against sending threatening letters and imposing sanctions for effect. So, I mean, those are possibilities. But let's remember the period of time in the first Trump administration, first of all, in Turkey. This was in the immediate aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016. And so Trump comes in January of 2017. And by the way, that was a tumultuous time in American politics as well, with protests and with legal actions. The Russian collusion dossier and all those sorts of things meant that there was tremendous tumult in both capitals. This also came at the sort of the tensest time with regards to Syria over the US and Turkish divergent approaches to the war there as we were just establishing the territorial caliphate of ISIS by partnering with YPG, which is the Syrian affiliate of the PKK. Both of those things are all three of those things that Washington tumult, the post-coup period. And now, of course, Fethullah Gülen has has died. And also with the successful conclusion, well, at least at this stage of the Syrian revolution, there are some things that are going to decrease in salience, as I mean, it's hard to get around from the Turkish perspective that as of circa 2017, 2018, the United States was home to federal. Guillén, who was widely believed in Turkey to have been the driving force behind the failed coup and that we were arming and expanding the capabilities of the



PKK affiliate to the most central concerns of the Turkish state. Now again, with Gülen gone and we'll see what's going to happen, and supposedly Secretary Blinken is going to Ankara on Friday to talk a little bit about what comes next in northeast Syria. But at a minimum, we can say that the Turkish concerns that the United States would stay forever to try to have a YPG, a stand that controlled vast territories in Syria, that's done that. So the question now is, does Trump fully pull out? Is this a staged withdrawal? Do we maintain some sort of negotiated presence until other arrangements can be made? How do we protect our former partners? Those are all questions that will be addressed by the new administration. But there is no doubt that the sharpness and the bitterness of what we were looking at in 2017 and 2018 will be less. I'm not saying there won't be problems. There will be problems in this relationship no matter who's president. But that's why I think compared to the first Trump term as per your question, that there's reasons to think it'll be less bitter, less sharp this time around.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Okay. So you're saying the stars are aligned with the death of Gülen, and the changes in Syria for a better relationship without the tensions of the first not all, but some of the tensions. But, you know, you've started off on Syria. You've touched upon Syria. I think our listeners are eager to hear your thoughts on Syria. But once we go into Syria, we're not going to be able to leave Syria. So I want to quickly ask Nick what he has to say about the Trump Erdogan dynamic, which will be very important. Clearly, both leaders like personal diplomacy and then move on to Evren for the Syria part. So, Nick, when you back and when you look back at the 2016-2020 period, it was often described as a bromance by the media, but it's been really somewhat volatile, which is explained that there was a set of conditions that are not necessarily all there now. So give me your sense of the Trump Erdogan dynamic and how what the ideological points of convergence are, what the sort of geo geopolitical points of convergence are moving forward. Doesn't everyone on to you to talk about Syria in a bit more depth?

**DANFORTH:** Yeah, there's been a lot of discussion about the personal relationship between Trump and Erdogan, the benefits that that undoubtedly brings in terms of allowing the two leaders to speak directly with each other and make policy that way. Also, in terms of the downside, the way that personalized relationship, as we saw with the letter which mentioned, can also go.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** To the letter, meaning the letter that President Trump wrote to President Erdogan, which is a big deal in Turkish media, where he said, don't be a fool. And just actually, literally, he that's what he wrote. And, of course, you know, just a parenthesis for our listeners.

**DANFORTH:** What I hope to do now, though, is take a step back and look at the ideological points of convergence in. Divergence, because I do think these will also play an important role in shaping US Turkish relations over the coming four years. I think there's a deep convergence in between Erdogan and Trump when it comes to their rejection of a liberal internationalist tradition in US foreign policy. And I think that divergence comes in in what they both see as replacing that liberal internationalist status quo. Both Trump and Erdogan have been hostile to, again, what's seen as this default US foreign policy, liberal internationalism, the worldview epitomized by the Brookings Institution, where we are today. But this shared hostility, I think, is something that unites them. And I think we've seen how that united them in their previous their previous relationship when Trump was in office. And you can see how this is going to play out. It seems, at least with the war in Ukraine, the war in Ukraine was, again, from the point of view of many people in Washington, a classic example of an authoritarian leader launching an unprovoked war of aggression against a democratic country. That liberal internationalist impulse, which, again, many of us and many people at Brookings have tirelessly championed over the last several years, was to respond to that by supporting Ukraine in resisting Russian aggression. Both Trump and Erdogan have diverged from that position. Both Trump and Erdogan seem not both to be far more sympathetic to Vladimir Putin's view of the invasion, have been more critical of NATO's, have been more critical of Ukraine. I.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** I think Nick froze. I know he's traveling. So, Evren, I'm going to jump to you until he comes back. And fact.

**DANFORTH:** Ukraine is likely setting up a situation where.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Yeah. We're listening.

**DANFORTH:** You know, again, setting up a situation where if we do have a cease fire along current front lines, United States stop supporting Ukraine countries, stop sanctioning Russia, Russia then becomes in a position to launch further aggression, thereby undermining long standing international norms against seizing territory by force. This is a situation again, Erdogan, Trump both very much on the same page. And this is likely a place, Ukraine, where US Turkish relations are going to get better, where we're going to see increased convergence. And we're we're going to see a diminishment of some of the tensions, whether about things like Gaza and the S-400. Whether about the specifics of the current war. We'll see. Tensions diverge.

The problem is, as much as both Erdogan and Trump seem opposed to this liberal international status quo, they do have very different ideas of what should come next. And, you know, if we're going to see convergence in Ukraine, I think we're going to see the much more dramatic divergence taking place in Gaza. This is a situation where neither the Trump or Erdogan administration seems particularly sympathetic to the liberal internationalist position, but they're rooting for different sides. Trump has made it very clear. It's also Erdogan has made it very clear for his part that he supports Hamas. He defends Hamas terrorism. This is obviously gone down very badly in Washington. But based on the people that the Trump administration has chosen for the Middle East, it seems like it's prepared to double down on the existing administration support for Israeli war crimes and might even be willing to go much further, whether it's sanctioning ethnic cleansing of Gaza, whether it's sanctioning the annexation of the West Bank. Again, this is a situation where both countries are, again, very much opposed to what kind of liberal internationalist norms, but for the civilizational reasons that everyone mentioned are taking very different stances on whose version of revisionism they sympathize with. And so I think the irony is that the more successful both this joint project of weakening the international order, of undermining these liberal norms, such as they are, I mean, I'd be the first to say they've not been great in the recent history anyways. But the more successful they are in undermining the status quo, the more the tension between what they have in mind for what comes next is going to come to the fore.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Nick I will. I had a conversation about all this with a senior Turkish official a few years ago. He said these the liberal international order is neither liberal nor in order, but.

**DANFORTH:** More inclined to agree with that than most people. I just think, however imperfect it's been up until now, we're about to see things get much worse.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** We'll see. We'll see. But you've made some very good points. I want to Evren. Evren, you've been very patient. Feel free to come in to comment on this far. But I also want to move to Syria. You know, we're obviously our listeners are interested in what's happening. What is Turkey's what are Turkey's interests? Maybe it's a good idea to lay them out. And do you see Ankara as the winner in all of this, the sort of the enormous opening in what is happening and what would be its priorities? Does that you know, so onto you?

**BALTA:** Yeah. Okay. But I have an objection. All right. Let me start with that. What I think what our region has said about the institutions, I think one of the context, the impulse to the importance or effectiveness of the institutions is that if you look at to the last decade, the Ukraine conflict pretty much stands out as the one of the best working mechanisms or best examples of two countries working together. And that has carried so much because of nature. And this is a naval conflict of the both countries used the need to a mechanism to have a dialog with each other.

**OUTZEN:** I concede the point. I concede the point I made. NATO's the one institution that does work. Look like the ones in Washington.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Guys, it's important to have a political science on the panel.

**OUTZEN:** Not not the ones in Washington and Ankara, though.

**BALTA:** Yes. Okay.

**BALTA:** So my point was only not about Washington and Ankara institutions, but about the multilateral institutions. And the institutionalization is pretty much important about that as well. In terms of the multilateralism.

**OUTZEN:** By the way, it was the CIA chief in the meet chief who got most of that set up.

**BALTA:** I mean, going back to your question, Aslı it's a huge one. We have been debating it in Turkey over the last ten days. It has become really the core argument whether Turkey is victorious or there are major risks. I'm trying to take a balanced position here and going to present both views. I mean, what are the opportunities that Turkey has and what are the some of the risks that Turkey is basically undergoing right now with what is happening in Syria? And I do agree that when you look at the outside and when you look at, you know, what's happening on the in Syria, from the position that I do on has been this has preservatives and ties Assad stands for since the start of the year, 15 years. And that's pretty much an accomplishment because every actor, a regional actor, global actor basically change their position towards Assad. Erdan has always been large, and that has by and in itself is a victory. So we have to acknowledge that. But what are some opportunities or will that some, as you were asking, Turkey's interests or what are what is Turkey

basically hoping to achieve with the new situation in Syria? First of all, I really have to underline the fact that Syria is now and has always been for the last decade is a domestic issue for Turkey. It's not a regional issue. It's not a global issue. It's a domestic. It's it's a regionalized, globalized civil war with a lot of domestic creating, lot of domestic issues and problems in Turkey. Syria is in Turkey. Turkey is in Syria, as we have been saying in the last ten days. All of the experts talking on this underlying this aspect of its domestic importance in many ways. So in a stable Syria is in Turkey's interests. Right. And so the Turkey definitely want to have a stable is want to have a stable Syria. But what does it mean by stability? Really, the first and that is that comes with risks. So what does he want first for the security? I mean, this has been on Turkey's agenda for, again, since 2011. The debate over the safe zone with limiting Kurdish autonomy or Kurdish aspirations is part of this. So Turkey is basically the first and foremost objective in Syria is to have a border security. The second, basically, which is a domestic issue, border security, like links of the Syrian Kurdish axis with the Turkish PKK, has been an important issue. One of the problems with between Turkey and the US as well. That's that. That's the first one. The second one is refugee management, which is also a domestic issue for Turkey. And now right now, the Turkish government thinks that a stable Syria would create conditions for refugees to return. And that is politically very important given that there is a lot of anti-migrant sentiment in Turkey. Key that shapes electoral patterns and parts of strategies as well. So that's the domestic issue as well. And definitely the government is going to push for that. And the third one is regional influence. Again, in the case of. Since the start of the Syrian conflict, one of the major aspirations of the Turkish government is to to become this regional actor. Now it has more of a chance with becoming I mean, having this really influence or leverage in Syria right now through its through the forces that it basically controls. And and the Syrian reconstruction basically provides a lot of economic opportunities to Turkey ever happens. And this is something that we have always been you know talking in Turkish politics, this construction luck, development or growth, it can come back and could be a solution to Turkey's economy problems as well. So that's there, too. And finally, Syria. As I said, Syria's stability is Turkey's stability. So if you have a stable Syria, then you may have a more stable Turkey. But what are the risks? Very briefly, I think this all this all you know, Turkey's aspirations comes with risks. The first risk that I basically identify is that it's the issue of control and conflict. Control or the aspiration to control always comes with conflict specifically in unstable situations like in Syria. So Turkey wants to contain Kurds and Kurdish aspirations. Turkey wants to maintain influence over states and over the serious future, including its constitution and this and that. And that comes with costs. It's not easy to do, and it may create local conflicts and regional conflicts as well. So all these groups have their own agendas, very difficult to control these groups all on agendas when you are on the ground in Syria needs a peacebuilding process. And when you have a very

powerful actor like Turkey with its own controlled militia forces or not control that bit its own forces, then it may complicate the process and it may create diverging processes. And this we need to follow up. Second, it's going to be very difficult in terms of refugee management because with the post Assad optimism right now, everyone in Turkey is basically expecting that the refugees are going to go back. But that's a very financially, logistically difficult process. And if it doesn't happen and there will be a backlash domestically in Turkey and we will see fueling of anti-immigrant feelings in Turkey. And it is going to be a very difficult climate to control for both for the government and for other political parties as well, and also for, you know, regionally as well. So that that we have you know, this refugee management is not going to be easy. Lots of problems. We can talk about that. But it's a problem of finally this powerful position. And this is something that Russia capitalizes on, can bring back conflicts between the United States and Turkey specifically with regards to the future of there seems to be a cooperation right now and coordination somehow that I see. But I used to be a cooperation and coordination in 2013. But before you had a major part between Turkey and the United States, and you have Israel as a powerful active right now in Syria who also wants to shape the serious future. And given that Turkey is really Turkey's anti-Israeli stance, which is a domestic issue as well, it might be very difficult to coordinate with Assad and then it might be very difficult to coordinate with the United States. So it really this entanglements now long term or medium term entanglements might it will made Syria might make Syria even more of a domestic issue and a problem for Turkey.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** So influence over Syria now is almost seen as a destiny into Turkish conversation. I think you've made some very, very important point. Opportunities and and and problems. If I could just interject my own view. I think Turkey is positioning itself to be what Iran is to Iraq. Turkey will be to Syria in the future, sort of a country that has an enormous influence in the political process and economic process and even more, you know, in Iraq, you cannot appoint a minister without Iran's approval, basically. And I, I think that is the sort of format we're looking at down the line. But I want to see. Slowly sort taking. And thank you also for highlighting the Israel issue because Turkey's Israeli tensions are now seemingly moving into the Syrian space. Syria will be an area of at least political contestation, meaning, you know, Turkish objection to what Israel has been doing over the past week. But it can Turkey and Israel may become close, very close in proximity because of Turkey's presence and in a future Syria. But I want to start taking questions from our listeners and stay with you, everyone, because there's one question I think that's very important. From someone whose name I'm not sure I should read because it's a it's a Department of State. Maybe they don't want to mention they don't want their name mentioned. But the question is one that I also had on my list. Any thoughts on the possible Kurdish opening domestically because. Regardless, despite regardless of what's

happening in Syria. Turkish public has been discussing this initiative in late October or early October that was started by the late Bachelet talk of a domestic reconciliation with none other than Abdullah Ocalan. And then Syria happened. How do how should we think of the two together? Does it make it easier, the downfall of the regime and Assad does make it more difficult for either actors. If I could have your thoughts on this quickly, then I'm going to go to Nic and Rich on the whole YPG, SDF question and Washington's take on it, but to you on the possible Turkish Kurdish reconciliation.

**BALTA:** In order to answer that question, I'm going to very briefly take you back to 2015 and what happened in 2015. So there was a solution process in Turkey and it bogged down. And for two reasons. Domestic.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** A peace process between Turkish government.

**BALTA:** Between the US, between the PKK and process. Golden has never been a peace process, never been called peace process, but solution process. So the process in 2015 collapsed for two reasons. The first one is the domestic reason, because the Turkish government, specifically outgoing government, asked Kurdish movement political movement to back him up in the elections to make him the president, and famously said at the limit, I said that we won't make you the president. And he is in prison ever since. So that was first, right? Is this domestic agreement.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Of the peace process or what? The process, the solution process. Mothers should not cry process, as it's called, in Turkey. Part of it was a political quid pro, you were saying, for the debt.

**BALTA:** Exactly. And it still is. That's why I'm taking you back to 2015. Right. So one part of is that, you know, of backing out long changing constitution, making him the president and when the Kurdish political party HDP back then I don't remember it was it it was was that HDP okay So so that was one of the reasons why it collapsed. And the second reason why it collapsed was the developments in Syria. And if you remember the Kobani protests that worried the Kurdish people in Turkey were holding flags. The Arbuckle is Kobani, right? So there was this huge feeling of empathy towards what's going on in Syria. And what matters in Syria is really huge, hugely important for the Kurdish population in Turkey, and it still is. So the two developments that these two things basically posture least on recent agenda, right? So the agenda is basically reelecting Erdogan through Kurdish support and changing the constitution. So this is what basically Bachelor and Erdogan government is asking indirectly, of course, if ever there's going to be a reconciliation

or resolution solution process, let me say. And second, reshaping Syria. So the Adnan government partially is basically asking for from the Kurdish population in Turkey to basically to well, to say to give support to the Turkish efforts in Syria or and in no way maybe having a Syrian autonomy, but under Turkish guardianship, Syrian Kurdish autonomy, but under Turkish guardianship. So here is the problem. Or let me say differently, it's limited Kurdish autonomy under Turkish oversight. So more limited than what. Is it that. You know, one person that they control in Syria with with a strong military partnership with the United States? Yes. It would want something that is more limited and possibly geographically smaller. The smaller. Yes, militarily, the methods are more structured. I mean, more in central structures. Here is the problem. What will Kurds gain from that? That's the question that the Kurds are going to answer. And it seems that what is on the table, on the negotiation table is not offering that much to the Kurds. And and what we see in the last ten days is basically, as every other actor is doing, they are Turkey is also trying to increase its negotiation power at the table as well before the Trump administration comes in and this and that. So but there is definitely going to be a negotiation, and this is the Turkish agenda, but we still don't know what is in it for Kurds, whether they are going to be accepting this. And that is also going to be related to the US position and the Trump administration's position vis a vis the Kurds. But the Trump administration is going to back up. Kurds keep backing up Kurds and Syria is going to be very important in shaping that negotiation well.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Time to turn to Rich. And Nick, on US interests in Syria, both in terms of what may take place in Damascus and its views on its led government transition, a Syria that is possibly more Sunni Islamist in all. But for part, that question for now. Rich, everyone talked about. What the future of the relationship between United States and the Syrian Kurds would be. We have a lot of questions on this issue. Basically, is the Trump administration going to continue US support for Syrian Kurdish forces, SDF? This is fundamentally important for the equation inside Turkey for Syria's future map, possible map and future governance structure. We have no idea, of course, what President Trump will do. He has given us some clues. But, you know, there are different personalities in his cabinet that have been very supportive of Syrian Kurds. I don't imagine that you know the answer either. But give us your sense of what the equation looks like, continued US support or not. And in terms of the partnership with SDF, and how can US be instrumental in helping bring a reconciliation process inside Turkey and in Syria? Can it be?

**OUTZEN:** Well, you.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** I think I've thrown too many questions that you. But any party.



**OUTZEN:** Okay, I'll just. I'll just ask the what I want.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** How Trump administration can approach this issue and how it should approach.

**OUTZEN:** Look, there's so much going on for in the interim between an election and an inauguration in Washington. There's so much going on in terms of staffing decisions and scoping who's going to do what and how to be effective. Day one, they don't really get to the nuts and bolts of policy that quickly. So I wouldn't want to prejudge where things are going to be. But the key elements I think, are present already and that we know President Trump does not want to maintain a military presence forever. He wants to get along with Erdogan and the Turks and is somewhat sensitive to their views on PKK, YPG. And yet in Washington, including in his incoming administration, there's a lot of sympathy, a lot of feeling of a moral obligation to the local partners who fought with us against ISIS. And I it's no surprise that I'm I'm no fan of the PKK, and I wasn't a fan of the YPG instrumentality. However, this is not great. Great powers don't just walk away from their partners. At least that's not the best statecraft practice. So I think there is an interest after the United States to play some role. And I think the only modality that's going to work is to say to Turkey, here's how we. And this gets a little bit to what everyone's saying. Here's how we step down. The geographic scope of this thing, this entity, here's how we step down their military capability so that they're no longer a 100,000 person force with air defense and tanks and artillery because that is a threat to Turkey, at least potentially, even though there have not been a lot of attacks conducted out of northeast Syria into Turkish territory, that it's a massive potential threat and it's also a political threat to the unity of Syria, which is something that Damascus now that it's under new management and Ankara both are going to be taking seriously. So from the US side, you say here's how we make sure this thing is not going to be a threat to you. And in return, what can it be? And that's going to require some some flexibility on the part of Ankara. Now, talking to folks involved with the security establishment in Ankara, I think I've heard of pragmatism. You know, the idea that we can't kill our way out of this problem, which is something the United States has learned through its counterterrorism in different places, it is all a matter of negotiating from a position of strength. What's happened over the last week or ten days is that the SDF slash YPG and its political movements have lost Tel Rafat. They've lost Manbij, they've lost control of their resources, everything west of the Euphrates. And there's a very real possibility that places like Raqqa and other Arab majority areas may sooner rather than later, demand to be reunited with the rest of Syria as opposed to being part of the autonomous administration in that whole thing. So if we accept the premise that as Turkey's risk and negotiating risk goes

down and negotiating position becomes stronger, the more flexible it will be or more open to negotiations, I think this starts to look doable. The United States cannot be a midwife to that process by making demands or by saying this goes on forever or insisting on a status quo that's clearly got a shelf life to it now. But taking and keeping in mind the fact that the AKP itself and or the NHP in this case has said, hey, now's the time, and we need to end this, because frankly, the regional wars have frightened Ankara. They have real worries about the stability of the area. Now is the time that there is an openness to something there, some entity or some. And again, it's not going to be under the sole management of PD, YPG. I don't think that's acceptable to Turkey yet, but something that is recognized as an autonomous area of some sort that has the KDP aligned Kurds and the Ocalan movement, Kurds, if they, you know, promise not not to attack Turkey, etc., and make some other but also some of the Arab elements and the Christian elements, there are something new that's not under a political monopoly. I think the Turks will be willing to negotiate that or should be in exchange for the US interest, which is to maintain peace, to take care of those partners that we had to not see them simply lose everything that they had and no guarantees of future stability. Maybe we sweeten the pot by, you know, promising some development funds if there's an agreement reached. I don't think it's impossible. As a matter of fact, I think after everything that's happened since November 27th, we're closer to that negotiating space being open than we have been since 2014.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Okay. So I want to underline a couple of things you mentioned here. I think implicit in what you said is that Kurdish leverage is weaker today than it was a month ago, six months ago. We are already seeing a Kurd SDF being pushed east of Euphrates. That could be a line that is possibly acceptable to Turkey. But you have also said it's likely that the current strength size military capabilities is would probably not be acceptable, but that US could negotiate some type of dialing down and and also political rebranding maybe that would whereby it could work with an inclusive and autonomous Syria Syrian Kurdish pluralist Syrian Kurdish entity with a with Iraq. Sorry pro Barzani Kurds. I mean everything what you're saying actually underlines the sort of stronger the idea that there is now a stronger Turkish hand. Turkish bargaining position in all of this. I think that seems to be my assessment, too. Nick, do you want to jump in on any of this or on what is happening in in in in Damascus, on the Syrian Kurds, maybe first.

**DANFORTH:** Yeah, I think it will be genuinely interesting to see if there's room for the United States and Turkey to cooperate in Syria. And, you know, I promise you, we don't have to get into polemics. But I do I have to jump back to our earlier discussion to just quickly say it's worth distinguishing between cooperation and engagement. Everyone supports engagement. America engages with our allies. We engage with our

enemies. We have phenomenal diplomats who do an excellent job of both of those. The real question for the US Turkish relationship is, is there a possibility for that engagement to lead to cooperation and genuinely working together to advance shared interests in Syria in the abstract? The United States and Turkey do have a very clear shared interest. Both countries want a stable, cohesive Syria that will not serve as an incubator for cross-border terrorism. But the problem is going back to the earliest days of the Syrian conflict, the United States and Turkey have disagreed on where the terrorist threat in Syria is. Turkey sees that terrorist threat is coming from that PKK aligned Kurdish movement, which is why, as it was advancing on Damascus, Turkish backed proxy forces were busy attacking the SDF. The United States, from his point of view, sees radical Islamist actors as the biggest threat. And it's worth remembering that the entire strained period of US Turkish relations that we've been talking about the entire past decade. Part of the reason this began to be so strained was, in fact, over Turkey's relationship with then Al Nusra in 2013. The Turkish government was very eager to continue providing support to Al Nusra fighters because it believed they were going to be the most militarily effective in ultimately bringing down the Assad regime.

**AYDINTAŞBAŞ:** Explain what Al Nusra this is to maybe listeners who know military with a precursor that this sort of the.

**DANFORTH:** Precursor to HDS, which was at the time Al Qaeda linked, are now no longer Al Qaeda-linked. But people still have some suspicions about where their political beliefs and orientations lie. At the time, the Obama administration was deeply concerned with Turkey's support for foreign Nusrah. Again, Turkey thought they were going to be the most militarily effective force in bringing down Assad. The United States was deeply concerned about whether or not these were really the guys that we wanted taking over Syria after Assad fell. Turkey's calculation clearly is proven, proven correct over the last week. It remains to be seen whether Washington's worries will prove equally correct. But at the end of the day, unless the Trump administration is prepared to take a much more accommodating approach towards Al Qaeda linked or formerly Al Qaeda linked groups than the Obama administration did, there's likely to be some serious tensions here in how Washington perceives Turkey's relations with its. You know and again, that may change that. We'll see how committed Fox is to shifting its worldview. We'll see how that plays out. There's again, I don't want to get too much into speculation, but there's some historical grounds for tension here as it comes to the as it comes to the YPG. They do think this will really this will hinge on how Ankara plays. You know, as Rick said, it's dealing with the YPG from a much stronger position right now. Will it choose to be more accommodating now that it's negotiating from a position of strength? Or will it end up being

triumphalist? Will it end up pushing its goals, pushing its expectations, pushing its bargaining position? If we, you know, see Turkey trying to take advantage of the fall of the Assad government to strengthen its position, to diminish the amount of political authority that the SDF has. Clearly present the Trump administration with a fait accompli. I will see how far it goes in trying to do that. We'll see what the military how militarily effective it is. We'll see what kind of backlash that generates in Washington. I mean, again, I do see a scenario in which this could, you know, if you had some really farsighted and sober diplomacy from Ankara, this could lay the groundwork for a more a healthy, lasting solution here. You could also see the temptation for Turkey to overstep, to push too far, to generate an enormous backlash and to come in, you know, just at the stage that by the time the Trump administration takes over, you have some of these voices that have been very sympathetic to the SDF, angry that Turkey has been in the process of killing American partners on the ground.

**DANFORTH:** So my intention was to turn to Evren and the domestic implications of what happened in Syria, which she talked about highlighting the refugee issue and and and some of the challenges there in terms of voluntary and timely return of Syrians, safe and voluntary return of Syrians. But I think our time is up. There's so many questions. It's my bad. But the conversation on Syria was so interesting that I did not really want to move on to China and CATsA and S-400 and some of the other issues that are clearly part of this relationship, but we haven't had a chance to address and I think our time is up. But I would like to encourage our listeners to actually logon and check out the essays where some of these sort of existing outline and polemical issues are discussed in greater detail. Everyone. Rich and Nick, really thank you all for your contributions for the essays I have to take. And thank Ellen Murkowski and highly deservedly as well. And I look forward to seeing you all very soon.