

Teaching Foreign Policy by Tracing Turkish-American Relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

Linda McCubbins  
International Studies Research Lab  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
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## **Teaching Foreign Policy by Tracing Turkish-American Relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries**

“Students will be able to describe how the United States became a world power and how it asserts its influence across the globe.” This is a learning objective for Tidewater Community College’s United States History 122. Included in this course are the following topics: World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War and its aftermath. In each of these eras, Turkey has played an integral role in American foreign policy. Therefore, by studying Turkish-American relations, students will have a better understanding of American foreign policy goals and initiatives over the past century, and a better understanding of the current state of American foreign policy. Moreover, by studying the interaction between these two countries, students will understand that foreign policy is not necessarily based on altruism. Countries, including the United States, base foreign policy on their own self-interests and not necessarily on virtue. Foreign policy today is still a game of realpolitik.

The United States began its relationship with Turkey in 1923 during the Lausanne Conference. In the 1920 Sevres Treaty, the Ottoman Empire was carved up by the western powers and there were severe restrictions on Turkey relating to its military and self-rule. The Sevres Treaty also considered options for a homeland for Turkey’s Kurdish population. Much of the restrictions were due to Turkey’s treatment of its Christian and minority populations, including the massacre of Armenians. However, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 reversed the Treaty of Sevres and following the idea of “self-determination.” Turkey was allowed to become a self-sufficient republic. The term self-determination is used loosely, because the Treaty of Lausanne had no provisions for a Kurdish homeland and there was a population exchange between Greece and Turkey. Willing or not, Christians living in Turkey were sent to Greece and Muslims living in Greece were relocated to Turkey. The participants at the Lausanne Conference believed this was the only way to end a decade of war between the Turks and

Greeks<sup>1</sup>. Although the United States followed an isolationist policy in the 1920s, it played an important part in negotiating the treaty and Turkey's independence. With its geographical location, American officials saw the value of a Turkish-American alliance. That is why the United States decided not to recognize and hold the Turks accountable for the Armenian genocide. Over the years, other western countries have recognized the atrocity as genocide; however, the United States still has not. Turkey's strategic location was too important to jeopardize.<sup>2</sup>

The Armenians were not the only group to come under the wrath of the Turks. Between 1923 and 1938, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk began radical reforms to westernize Turkey. Atatürk's promise in both the Sevres and Lausanne treaties that the Kurdish minority would enjoy full political and cultural rights was soon broken when the regime brutally put down a tribal Kurdish rebellion in 1925. All linguistic, political and cultural expressions of Kurdish identity were banned. By Atatürk's death in 1938, tens of thousands of Kurds died. The oppression of the Kurds in Turkey continues to the present.<sup>3</sup> While it opposes the treatment of the Kurds today, the United States did not take a stand on the issue during the 1920s and 1930s. The United States' non-involvement in the matter stemmed from strong isolationist sentiment during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. After World War II, the United States, who was suddenly the world superpower, took a strong internationalist stance and by the early 1950s, the Turkish geographic location became very important to American Cold War strategy. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, Soviet expansionism dictated the US-Turkish relationship for the next forty years. Turkey sent troops to Korea between 1950 and 1953,

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<sup>1</sup> Onur Yildirim, *Diplomacy and Displacement: Reconsidering the Turco-Greek Exchange of Populations*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Richard G. Hovannisian, Ed. *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* (Transactions Publishers 2007), 318.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Park, *Modern Turkey: People, State and Foreign Policy in a Globalized World* (Routledge 2012), 11-20.

became a NATO member in 1952, and in 1957, it allowed the United States to place missiles targeting Russia in its country.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1950s, Turkey's geographic location made it an extremely important ally for the United States. However, the United States' decision to remove the missiles after the 1962 Cuban crisis made Turkey less important. Moreover, the Cyprus crisis during 1963-1964 had a harmful effect on Turkish-American relations and during the era of detente (1967-1979), the Western powers, including the United States, began to turn their backs on Turkey. Nevertheless, Turkey remained part of the Western alliance and during the second Cold War of 1979-1985, Turkey's strategic position was once again important after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

Although it once again made Turkey important in the eyes of the West, the Afghanistan invasion was one of the events that ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. With the end of the Cold War, the 1990s were generally good for the West. However, wars in the Balkans and the Caucasus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, along with failed peace attempts in the Middle East, were difficult for Turkey. Unlike its NATO allies, Turkey did not reap the benefits of the "peace dividends" of the 1990s. Moreover, the threat of the Soviet Union was replaced by Syria, Iraq, Iran and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, beginning in 1999, Turkish foreign policy strategies began to change as a result of rapprochement with Syria and the defeat of the PKK. Turkey also mended its relationships with Greece and Iran.<sup>6</sup>

After the events of the 1990s, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 ushered in a new relationship between Turkey and the West. At first, Turkey regained its relationship with the United States

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<sup>4</sup> Gokhan Cetinsaya, "A Tale of Two Centuries: Continuities in Turkish Foreign and Security Policy." In *Contentious Issues of Security and the Future of Turkey*, Nursin Atesoglu Guney, Ed., 5-18. 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ozden Zeyrepoktav, *Turkey in the Twenty-First Century: A Quest for a New Foreign Policy*. (Ashgate Publishing Company 2011), 10-11.

and helped in the Afghanistan War. However, they refused to help the United States in its 2003 invasion of Iraq for many reasons. Public opinion of the Turkish people went against the invasion. Stationing United States troops on Turkish soil brought back the “Sevres syndrome.” Would the West once again try to control them or partition the country to make a Kurdish state? Perhaps they would make a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. As a result, the Turks have been moving further from the West and closer to its Middle Eastern neighbors and Russia in the 21st century.<sup>7</sup>

Turkish-American relations have been cool since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. When Barack Obama became president, Turkey hoped that the two countries would again be close. Obama supported Turkey as a NATO ally during his campaign and paid less attention to Israel than his predecessor. He even hoped to create a “model partnership” with Turkey. Since Turkey was a secular country who had been on the road to democracy, he hoped it would be a model that Arab countries would follow. However, problems with Iran and Israel’s attacks on Gaza and *Mavi Marmara*--the killing of nine Turkish humanitarian workers by the Israeli government--made the idea of a “model partnership” obsolete. Moreover, the United States has supported Kurdish (YPG) forces fighting in Syria despite Turkish accusations that the YPG is a terrorist organization. Finally, the United States refused to extradite the leader of the terrorist organization FETO. Fetullah Gulen, a long-term resident of Pennsylvania led an unsuccessful coup against the Turkish government in 2016. With the installation of authoritarian president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2014 and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Turkish-American relations are at its lowest point. Trump’s executive orders very early in his presidency to ban immigration from seven Muslim countries and his decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem only made the relationship tenser.<sup>8</sup> In July 2019, the Turkish government purchased 2.5 billion dollars-worth of S-400 missiles from Russia. Not only was the sale in

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cagri Erhan and Efe Sivis. "Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future." *Insight Turkey*, (January 2017), 103-111.

violation of NATO, it gives Russia a strategic foothold in a NATO country. In retaliation, Donald Trump suspended Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter jet program. This newest episode has made the divide between the United States and Turkey even wider.

The Turkish-American relationship is a textbook case of realpolitik. The United States has disregarded Turkish wrongdoing when its strategic location aided American foreign policy objectives. However, when Turkey was not strategically important, the United States often ignored its NATO ally. Looking out for their own best interests, each country has allied with enemies of the other. This can particularly be seen with Turkey's recent purchase of S-400s from Russia and the lack of United States' reaction to the *Mavi Marmara* incident. During negotiations at Lausanne, Ataturk promised to turn Turkey into a democratic republic. Turkey has never realized this goal, and President Erdogan has brought Turkey backwards instead of forward. His increasingly authoritarian regime has taken many civil liberties away from the people and he appears to be reverting back to many of the old Ottoman ways. It could be just a matter of time before all vestiges of democracy and secularism disappear. The United States and Turkey have been at odds since 2003. Would a better relationship and understanding between the two countries have kept the authoritarian regime of Erdogan at bay? While this question can never be answered, an in-depth study of these two countries' relationship will help students understand how foreign policy is made. It will also give them a better understanding of the United States' growing influence in the world during the twentieth century and its ever changing role in the twenty-first century. Many of the resources found in the following bibliography will be used to update lecture materials and construct reading and problem-based learning assignments for United States History 122. The bibliography is compiled from previous research as well as recent research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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