

**The Historical Backdrop to the United States’  
Relationship with the Syrian Kurds**

by

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## Introduction

The Syrian Civil War, a conflict that began in 2011, had by 2012 transformed into a proxy war with Russia and Iran supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad while the United States (US) supported the Syrian Kurdish rebels. In 2014 the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) crossed the Iraq-Syria border en masse, compelling the US to find a local actor capable of defeating ISIS to avoid committing US troops to the conflict.<sup>1</sup> The People's Protection Unit (YPG), comprising fighters from northern Syrian Kurdish communities, was in the best position to oppose ISIS; this, due to the YPG's geographic location and organization. This position was a by-product of the governing apparatus created within the quasi-autonomous area of Rojava, which the Kurds had carved out in northern Syria during the chaos that followed the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>2</sup> US support behind the YPG was a response consistent with principles of realpolitik, which favour geostrategic thinking in the pursuit of a state's self-interest; this, as opposed to idealistic policies, such as have been sporadically articulated on the surface of US foreign policy toward the Kurds since the end of Woodrow Wilson's presidency. However, the US has historically favoured the application of realpolitik-oriented principles in its treatment of the Syrian Kurds. The US's treatment of the Syrian Kurds during the Syrian Civil War is no exception. Therefore, when the US vacillated from support for the Kurds' cause, to President Donald Trump's stated decision in late 2018 to withdraw US

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<sup>1</sup> Truls Hallberg Tønnessen 'The Islamic State after the Caliphate' *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 2. <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-1/tonneson.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Strangers in a tangled wilderness ed, *A small key can open a large door: the Rojava Revolution*, San Bernardino: Strangers in a tangled wilderness, 2015, 4.

forces from Syrian territory

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choose this time frame because it represents the period in which US foreign policy toward the Kurdish population is most salient, due to the movement toward the creation of states in the Middle East following the end of the First World War. Having noted \_\_\_\_\_, I will now outline the events suggesting the presence of an underlying realpolitik



have adversely affected                      objective of containing communism, a policy that is illustrative  
of the tension between realpolitik and idealistic practice0nrwithcn on

the 1967 June War, the US and Israel believed that they could negotiate with the regime of Hafez al-Assad.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Syria was not the only state the US did not want to destabilize. During this period, Turkey remained a valuable NATO ally. Prior to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Turkey accommodated US missiles aimed at the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> During the Crisis, the US secretly agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the incorporation of Marxist ideology in the 1980s by the most prominent Kurdish opposition group, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), added to the US disinterest in supporting a bid to destabilize the government in Ankara.<sup>13</sup>

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to ensure stability in Syria so as not to jeopardize the possibility of a peace deal between the two states.<sup>19</sup>

The fifth and final section of this hostility toward the Turkish government throughout the 2000s, and moderate attempts by the US to urge Turkey to better treat its Kurdish minority.<sup>20</sup> In the early 2000s, Turkey was attempting to join the European Union (EU), and with pressure from all sides, the Turkish government made some concessions to the Kurdish minority on freedom of speech.<sup>21</sup> However, these concessions were reduced due to pressure from the Turkish army, and there was a continuation of hostilities against the PKK after a ceasefire broke down in 2004.<sup>22</sup> As for Syria, upon Hafez al-death in 2000, power was passed down to his son Bashar al-Assad, opening up a period of political ferment .<sup>23</sup> People within Syria anticipated that Bashar al-Assad would usher in reform and improve the lives of his population.<sup>24</sup> During the first few years of his presidency, it seemed that this might be the case; however, by the latter half of the 2000s, he began to implement the same repressive measures that the country had experienced

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<sup>19</sup> Daoudy, Marwa, 221-227.

<sup>20</sup> Lockhart, Joe, *National Archives, February 16, 1999*. Accessed October 25, 2018. <https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1999/02/1999-02-16-press-briefing-by-joe-lockhart.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Baurder, Joerg,

under his father, due to Bashar al-                    inability to                    .<sup>25</sup> In  
2003, the US sweepingly censured al-Assad after he rescinded the Damascus Spring policy;  
however, the US never directly pressured al-Assad on the Syrian Kurds' behalf, as it was not in  
                    best interest to destabilize Syria.<sup>26</sup>

The second chapter will consider how the US' continued adherence to its underlying  
realpolitik orientation affected its interactions with the Syrian and Turkish Kurds over the second  
decade of the twenty-first century. Ironically, although the situation in Syria has significantly  
                    has not, making it unsurprising that the US  
wanted to withdraw its military

interest in remaining on the sidelines of the conflict, which overruled its idealistic motivations. Nevertheless, by 2018 the YPG alliance with the Syrian Defence Force (SDF), a wider coalition of rebel groups including non-Kurdish Syrian rebels and a contingent of foreign fighters, had significantly diminished fighters and territory within Syria. Due to the reduced threat that ISIS was perceived as posing to the US, President Donald Trump asserted late in 2018 that the US would withdraw all remaining troops out of Syria.<sup>29</sup> Initially, President Trump claimed that he would withdraw the military without guaranteeing the safety of Kurdish allies from the Turkish government, who had threatened to drive the Kurds out of territory close to the Syrian-Turkish border due to fear of its own Kurdish opponents being harboured in Syria.<sup>30</sup> This policy was consistent with the ly

aspirations while simultaneously risking further harm to the US relationship with Turkey might reveal the amount of idealism in the toward Syrian Kurdish nationalism.

## Chapter 1: The historical relationship between the US and the Turkish and Syrian

### Kurds: 1919-2010

#### 1.1: The age of possibility and the interwar period

Over the past century, there has been a relatively consistent, realpolitik-oriented pursuit of national self-interest within US foreign policy with regard to the Kurds, maintained by





Lausanne.<sup>42</sup> Britain did so because it believed that further divisions of the Turkish territory would weaken the state, making Turkey less capable of being a powerful ally and a bulwark against the USSR which would benefit Britain if it could strengthen its alliance with Turkey while

<sup>43</sup> The British retraction of support and the differing interpretations of Fourteen Points were the first post-World War One instances of powerful states abandoning the Kurds; however, they would not be the last. As a result of policies in particular, the Kurdish populations were split up into the states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.



The history of the Kurds within Syria as an individual group separate from all other Kurds within the Middle East began at the end of World War One, with the creation of the Mandate system that gave the Mandate of Syria to the French. The French recognized the Kurds under their protection as an ethnic group that was distinct from all other communities within Syria, and in fact viewed the diversity within the country as an opportunity to further imperial



The Turkish Kurds interwar conditions



into believing that the Turk was cruel and could not be trusted.<sup>64</sup> It was only after the US re-established diplomatic relations with Turkey and found that the country was espousing a secular Western model of governance that the roots of the US-Turkish alliance were established. The restoration of diplomatic relations slowly changed the US cultural perceptions of Turkey. This was combined with the burgeoning alliance between the two countries, which resulted in no future interwar-era presidential administration, after supporting the Turkish Kurdish bid for independence.

Additionally, US interwar administrations after 1921 did not pressure France to improve its treatment of the Syrian Kurdish population.<sup>65</sup> The rationale for US disengagement from the Syrian Kurdish struggle for independence is understandable orientation, as France controlled the Syrian Mandate and the US was in no position to oppose the inclination, nor would the US have had any geostrategic incentive to do so, as the French did not pose a threat to the US. However, the US interwar administrations also did not explicitly support the expansion of European empires, which contributed to idealism. In so far as its future policies toward the Syrian Kurds are concerned, idealism was always considered less important in the face of realpolitik concerns.

The international prominence of debates within the interwar period concerning self-determination created the circumstances necessary for the administrators of states with a Kurdish population to treat them as an individual nation, rather than an insignificant group that could be ignored. During this period, most governments with a Kurdish population considered the merits

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

of creating an autonomous Kurdish sector within their states, which indicates that at the beginning of the interwar period the Kurds were strong and influential enough to be heard. However, by the end of the Mandate period, the Kurds had not been given any lasting autonomous area, and were effectively losing their right to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group within their host states.<sup>66</sup> The Kurds of Syria did not have the opportunity to regain their rights and autonomy, which proved just out of reach within the Mandate period, until the inception of the 2011 Syrian Civil War and the power vacuum that resulted in the creation of the quasi-independent state of Rojava. Meanwhile, the Turkish Kurds continue to this day to fight for an opportunity to take back what they lost during the interwar period.

## Chapter 1.2 The early Cold War

For the Syrian people, the Mandate period concluded when Syria was released into independence in 1946. The French were forced to withdraw from Syria due to increased pressure from Britain and the US, combined with post-war economic conditions that reduced ability to devote resources to the Syrian Mandate.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the French were partially persuaded to accord Syria independence in exchange for US economic assistance, through the 1948 Marshall Plan, to rebuild France after the destruction of the Second World War.

The beginning of the Cold War in 1945 forced states to take sides or opt to remain neutral by joining the non-aligned movement, in what would be a 45-year long conflict that affected

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<sup>66</sup> With the exception of the short-lived republic of Mahabad in 1945-46 in Iran. Roosevelt, Archie, "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *Middle East Journal* 1, (1947): 247.



Damascus government. Taken in isolation, this decision indicates that the Syrian Kurds had lost much of their strength and influence within Syria, an incorrect perception that resulted in the US consistently overlooking the Syrian Kurds during this period. However, analysis of the situation was significantly over-simplified.

Prior to the Islamist party came to power, Syrian Kurds were able to hold positions within the Damascus government, indicating that rather than losing influence, the Kurds had gained





of Kemalism set out during Atatürk <sup>78</sup> When a ruler overstepped the boundaries set out by Kemalism, the Turkish army would move to overthrow the government without the need for a popular uprising. The army would then rule the country until elections could be held to find a new leader. An additional element that led Turkey into stability was the influence of the



## Chapter 1.3 Alliances solidify

If the forging of alliances characterized the early Cold War era, then the 1970s



period, its policies concerning the Iraqi Kurds did indirectly influence the Turkish Kurds and provide one of the clearest examples of \_\_\_\_\_ stance toward the Kurds.

Throughout the early 1970s, the US had supported the Iraqi Kurds in their struggle \_\_\_\_\_ athist government in Baghdad. However, when it became clear that the Iraqi Kurds resistance was collapsing, the US withdrew support.<sup>95</sup> The situation was made public in 1976 by the Pike Papers CIA leak that was published in the *Village Voice*.<sup>96</sup> The documents do not positively portray \_\_\_\_\_ Secretary of State, emphasizing his desertion of the Kurds. However, in his memoirs, Kissinger notes that he felt sorry the US had abandoned its short-lived alliance with the Iraqi Kurds, but the US had to do what was in its own self-interest.<sup>97</sup> The US support for the Iraqi Kurds in the early 1970s was the first instance of direct US support for a Kurdish community since Woodrow \_\_\_\_\_ y. A policy that the US pursued partially because it wanted to destabilize Iraq due to its support for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi the Shah of Iran.<sup>98</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ era, \_\_\_\_\_ explicitly realist. In this instance, there are strands of idealistic thinking such as Kissinger \_\_\_\_\_ even if people within the Ford administration had wished the outcome to be different,

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self-interest prevailed when creating policy. The realist treatment of the Iraqi Kurds in the 1970s is also reflected in its treatment of the Kurds in the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran War.

The Iraq-Iran War began when Saddam Hussein, the ruler of Iraq, attacked Iran. The US stepped in to support Iraq because it felt threatened by the Islamic regime that had taken power in Iran in 1979 under Ayatollah Khomeini; however, in 1987, the Iran-Contra scandal broke, and it became clear that the US did not want either side to win, and had in fact been supporting both combatants.<sup>99</sup> During the conflict, the US made a third alliance with the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in northern Iraq who had rebelled against Saddam Hussein in 1983. The US promised to support the Kurds in their rebellion against Hussein and assist them in their bid to create a Kurdish controlled area in northern Iraq. The US supported the Iraqi Kurds because it needed another actor to oppose Hussein, to prevent the war ending in a decisive victory for either the Iranians or the Iraqis; thus, it was in the US perceived best interest to retain the status quo between the two states.<sup>100</sup> However, in the light of its predictably pragmatic stance, the US abandoned its alliance with the Kurds when the war concluded. In other words, the Reagan administration treated the Iraqi Kurds as a means to an end, rather than recognizing their intrinsic geopolitical legitimacy or their right to national self-determination.

The Iraqi Kurds were not the only Kurdish group influenced by the US





the Turkish Kurds because the no-fly zone directly bordered the mountainous Kurdish border region of Turkey, which allowed for an exchange of people with many PKK fighters finding refuge and sharing expertise with the Iraqi Kurds as they had done throughout the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>105</sup> The PKK was inspired by the Iraqi Kurds' semi-autonomous area that developed after the implementation of the no-fly zone, thereby reinvigorating efforts against the Turkish government. The US was less concerned about the alliance between the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds in the face of cross-border incursions by the Turkish Army in pursuit of the PKK, a policy Turkey had also pursued during the Iran-Iraq conflict. In 1991 the US was opposed to but was unable to physically stop Turkey in case it refused to allow NATO to retain its base of operations in the country.<sup>106</sup> Ironically, the NATO base that the US was using to impose the no-fly zone in Iraq was situated in Turkey. Therefore, PKK benefited from the Turkish government's actions.<sup>107</sup>

willingness to permit the US-led NATO coalition to protect the Iraqi Kurds from base in Turkey illustrates the continued, strong US-Turkey alliance policy is even more noteworthy when considering that the Turkish government perceived policy as a direct threat to the country. compliance suggested that it still highly valued its relationship with the US and was not willing to jeopardize the alliance even at the perceived expense of its internal security.

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<sup>105</sup> Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 44.

<sup>106</sup> Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 159.

<sup>107</sup> Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 44.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, clashes between the PKK and the Turkish government became increasingly regular and violent. By 1994 the PKK had been

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to hunt down dissenting members of the Kurdish population.<sup>109</sup> The US government began to urge the Turkish government to consider the human rights of the Kurdish communities within the country, and stop treating all Kurds as though they were members of the PKK.<sup>110</sup> However, the rhetorically rooted in idealism was only present on the surface of US policy, and was never backed up with the threat of economic sanctions

candidate country

and Turkey forced Damascus to expel Öcalan in 1998.<sup>117</sup> The US policy toward the Syrian government are, however, consistent with its underlying realism. It was perceived best interest to rhetorically pressure Syria in conjunction with surrounding its Kurdish population, but it was not in its best interest to jeopardize a potential peace treaty between Syria and Israel on behalf of the Syrian Kurds.

### 1.5 2000s Alliance instability

Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, US foreign policy toward the Syrian and Turkish Kurds was shaped by two major events: the 9/11 attack on the US by Al-Qaeda, and the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The US invasion of Iraq resulted in the continued alliance with the northern Iraqi Kurds.



the PKK in multiple rounds of negotiations in what has become

as it was more concerned with the perceived terrorist threat posed by the PKK; this was due to the intensified post-9/11 emphasis on fighting terrorism.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the US-Syria relationship was shaped around military presence in Lebanon, which it had invaded in 1976 after the initiation of the Lebanese Civil War. The US pressured the Syrian government to withdraw its troops from the country and stop supporting Hezbollah, organization that the US considered a terrorist group and a direct threat to Israel.<sup>129</sup> The Syrian government was disillusioned by the pressure that they received from the US and, as a result, did not support it in the 2003 Iraq War.<sup>130</sup> Although Syria did eventually conceded to international pressure, withdrawing its troops from Lebanon in 2005, the US continued to criticize the regime, only this time for its treatment of the Syrian population.<sup>131</sup> [al-

, and that the US did not appreciate how demeaning it was to be seen to submit to international pressure by withdrawing Syrian troops from Lebanon.<sup>132</sup> Ironically, Israel was unsupportive

in 2000 when Bashar al-Assad took over from his father, Hafez al-Assad. The Syrian population hoped that Bashar would be a more moderate ruler who would improve their life situation.<sup>134</sup> Directly after he took power, Bashar al-Assad implemented the Damascus Spring doctrine which policies. The Damascus Spring revived cultural and democratic movements in Syria while removing barriers to politics and education for the Kurdish population. However, this policy proved short-lived, with al-Assad reinstating in 2003, still suffering from the that al-Assad had no recourse to rectify.<sup>135</sup>

In 2004, riots broke out at a football match, sparking the Qamishli uprising, otherwise known as the Kurdish intifada.<sup>136</sup> The rioters were protesting the US invasion of Iraq, with Sunni Syrians supporting Saddam Hussein

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moment of self-realization that they could make the Damascus government listen to their concerns, while also becoming increasingly visible to the international community.<sup>139</sup> Although by late 2005 the Syrian government had quashed the protests, physical defeat had not diminished the Kurds' renewed commitment to oppose the government. CIA records indicate that there were numerous attempts by the Syrian Kurds in 2009 to contact the KRG in Iraq for help with circulating their message across Iraqi media platforms that had a larger audience, and to acquire economic aid from the KRG.<sup>140</sup> In 2009, the Iraqi Kurds refused to contribute aid or assist in the distribution of the Syrian Kurds' message; however, the cross-border communication indicates that the Syrian Kurds had begun organized activism against the Damascus government two years before the 2011 Arab Spring.<sup>141</sup>

Additionally, the Syrian Kurds in exile had the support of the US government even before the Qamishli uprising brought their plight into the international spotlight. The US had organized conferences in the early 2000s to hear the Syrian Kurds' viewpoint meeting in 2006 to discuss the future of the Syrian Kurds among Kurds who still resided in Syria; members of the Syrian Kurdish diaspora living in North America; and the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, along with US State Department officials.<sup>142</sup> However, even though the US did not



expansive that the government drew the military back to the larger cities to retain control, leaving the northern border areas, which were primarily occupied by Kurds, free from government suppression. The power vacuum that followed the regime's tactics allowed a subsection of the Kurds, known as the YPG, the freedom to mobilize.<sup>146</sup> The YPG continued to fight against the government throughout the Syrian Civil War; however, they were also in the process of forming the quasi-autonomous state of Rojava, which the Democratic Union Party (PYD), declared as an independent state in 2012.<sup>147</sup>

The US entered the scenario approximately six months after the protests started. On August 11, 2011, President Barack Obama consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.<sup>148</sup> Al-Assad chose not to bend to the wishes of his population or the advice of the international community, continuing to brutally repress the Syrian people even after the army was forced to retreat to the major cities. As the Civil War unfolded, the US policy toward Syria intensified. In 2012 the Obama administration stipulated the so-called red line policy, indicating that the US would take decisive action against the Syrian regime if al-Assad used chemical weapons against the civilian population.<sup>149</sup> On August 21, 2013, al-Assad used chemical weapons on the population in Ghouta.<sup>150</sup> The US did nothing.

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<sup>146</sup> Schmidinger, Thomas, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of the Syrian Kurds*, 92.

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<sup>149</sup> Nahlawi

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

that he had espoused prior to the 2012 election did not enunciate a policy that the US could practically follow through on after al-attack, due to the surrounding strategic concerns the US had to take into account. President Obama pledged during his first term in office to withdraw US troops from the rebuilding effort in Iraq that the US had undertaken after the initial invasion into the country in 2003. To that end, Obama had completed a successful withdrawal of all US personnel from Iraq by the end of 2011.<sup>151</sup> Only two years later, it would not have been in the Obama best interest, partially due to domestic pressure from his joint chiefs of staff, to reengage US troops in another war in the Middle East.<sup>152</sup> its historical relationship with Syria. Syria, as a staunch Russian ally throughout the Cold War and into the present day, had not formed particularly strong trading ties with the US since the end of the Cold War. Syria did not contain any important resources that the US wished to protect, and the US had made a habit of criticizing Bashar al- policies since he took office in 2000.<sup>153</sup> Additionally, the US did not want to repeat in Syria the failure of the 2011 UN-mandated humanitarian intervention in Libya under the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect, nor did the Russians want to see the US take a Libya-patterned heavy-handed response toward the

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<sup>151</sup> Logan, Joseph, , *Reuters*, December 17, 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-withdrawal/last-u-s-troops-leave-iraq-ending-war-idUSTRE7BH03320111218>.

<sup>152</sup> The Joint chiefs of staff feared that that attack in Ghouta had not crossed the red line policy laid down by Obama in 2012 and did not believe that taking military action against the Assad regime after the Ghouta attack would stand up to domestic scrutiny. Paphiti, Anthony and Sascha-Dominik eign- *Middle East Policy* XXV no.2 (2018): 142. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/doi/epdf/10.1111/mepo.12347>

<sup>153</sup> Haas, Mark, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, 90.

Syrian Civil War.<sup>154</sup> In essence, the US did not have a reason to attempt to stabilize Syria by intervening, nor the political capital to support another regime change in the Middle East once al-Assad red line policy. Yet again, the US was willing to forsake the Kurds and, in this instance, the surrounding Syrian population, if this served objective of remaining on the sidelines of the conflict. The US reached this policy decision through a pragmatic calculation that placed self-interest over idealistic rhetoric, similar to previous decisions the US had reached on the treatment of the Syrian Kurds.

In 2013 a small group of ISIS fighters crossed over the Syria-Iraq border; the border had been made porous by the lack of Syrian government control in the region after 2011, together with the government collapse in Iraq after the US army withdrew.<sup>155</sup> However, it was not until early 2014 when a large number of ISIS fighters crossed into Syria, symbolically ripping up the Sykes-Picot agreement as they went. The Sykes-Picot agreement was a document signed between the British, the French, Italians and Tsarist Russians in 1916, effectively splitting up the Middle East into colonial spheres of influence. Although the Sykes-Picot borders were never implemented in their entirety, ISIS ripping up of the agreement was a symbolic act of rejecting the boundaries put in place by Western imperialism. s spread into Syria changed calculation from one of little investment to larger stakes in the war against terror.<sup>156</sup> Since the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the group out of which ISIS emerged, had been formed in 2006, it was

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<sup>154</sup> The Libyan intervention failed spectacularly after the dictator Muammar Gaddafi was killed, after which Libya tumbled into chaos.

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para 7.

<sup>155</sup> Abboud, Samer N, *Syria*, 122.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

listed by the US as a terrorist group.<sup>157</sup> As a result of President George W. Bush's War on Terror, the US was automatically set in opposition to ISIS, and was expected to contribute to the fight against the group.<sup>158</sup> The US policy in Syria changed because it no longer had to justify any involvement

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although more discernibly, during the Trump administration.                      decision not to uphold the red line policy, taken together with the small number of US troops committed to support the Syrian Kurds and the minor amount of economic aid supplied, underscores how the Obama administration, viewed by many as an example of liberal humanitarianism, also followed a policy of self-interest, with little time for consideration of the humanitarian cost of the conflict. Neither Obama nor Trump wanted the US to enter into another quagmire in the Middle East under their respective administrations. Trump's December 2018 announcement to withdraw US troops drew censure from members of his government and the international community because critics viewed Trump as abandoning                      Syrian Kurdish allies.<sup>164</sup> However, if observers                      realpolitik trend, Trump's decision to order the withdrawal of US troops would not have come as a surprise. The only difference from previous administrations is that                      governing style has stripped away the veneer of liberal humanitarianism and has been unapologetic about the self-interested policies the US continues to pursue.

The example of Turkey that has been used throughout this thesis to provide a comparison



Syrian Kurdish rebels in December 2018. Throughout the conflict, the Turkish government balanced its policy by not

entering

approach to ending the conflict.<sup>169</sup>

The US reaction to Turkey's 2015 decision to launch attacks against the Kurds in Syria was fundamentally pragmatic. -time NATO ally prevented the US abandoning the US-Turkey alliance in the same manner as alliances with different Kurdish groups over the past 100 years. However, it was in best interest to continue to support the Syrian Kurds rather than place a large contingent of US troops in Syria, even given to the Syrian Kurds. The US tried to appease Turkey by never directly funding the PKK, while still supporting the Syrian YPG. However, it appeared that even without direct support for the PKK, the US-Turkey alliance might have been damaged. The two historic allies were placed at odds with each other when, after President Trump's order to withdraw US troops in December 2018, President threatened to forcibly remove all the Syrian Kurds from the Syrian-Turkish border area.<sup>170</sup> Initially, it appeared that the Trump administration had completely abandoned the Syrian Kurds, which would have been consistent .<sup>171</sup> However, on January 13, 2019, President Trump tweeted that the US would place harsh economic sanctions on Turkey if it harmed the .<sup>172</sup> Although this does appear to be a slight deviation from historic US policy, it remains to be seen if the administration will follow through on its threat and potentially

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<sup>171</sup> There is an interesting comparison to be drawn here with the reaction that the French had to ss Kurdish autonomy during the interwar period; in both situations, the powerful

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harm relations with Turkey merely rhetorical. If one looks to historic US policy for an answer, it is more likely than not that the US will once again abandon the Syrian Kurds to serve its self-interested agenda.

### Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to show that the US has favoured a realpolitik-orientated outlook rather than idealism in its interactions with the Kurdish populations of Syria and Turkey. I have examined the policies of US administrations over a period of 100 years to conclude that under the surface, all US presidents' treatment of the Syrian and Turkish Kurds were essentially decided through similar realpolitik calculations even if the overlying idealistic rhetoric appeared to be stronger in some instances as compared with others. As a result, members of P December 2018 decision to desert the Syrian Kurds by ordering the withdrawal of US troops from Syria should not have been surprised. Future historians must continue to study the Syrian conflict, and critically analyze President Trump's future policies toward the Syrian Kurds once US troops are physically withdrawn from the conflict. An additional area of future research could examine the stance toward the Syrian Kurds if the US places economic sanctions on Turkey to protect them. It is possible that if Trump keeps his promise to the Syrian Kurds, the administration's surface rhetoric will be altered; however, it appears unlikely that the Trump administration will significantly diverge from the realpolitik calculations that have shaped US foreign policy toward the Kurds since at least 1921.





*Journal of International Affairs*, 61, no. 2 (2008):215-234. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/pdf/24358120.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Acf5a4c0baa4d684a460c52f758065364>.

2014: strategic implications for the United

*Turkish Studies*

Olson, Robert, ed.

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