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Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief

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SUMMARY

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The United States and Turkey have been NATO allies since 1952 and share some vital interests, but harmonizing their priorities can be difficult. These priorities sometimes diverge irrespective of who leads the two countries, based on contrasting geography, threat perceptions, and regional roles.

Turkey's core security and economic relationships and institutional links remain with Western nations, as reflected by some key U.S. military assets based in Turkey and Turkey's strong trade ties with the European Union. However, various factors complicate U.S.-Turkey relations. For example, Turkey relies to some degree on nations such as Russia and Iran for domestic energy needs and coordination on regional security, and therefore balances diplomatically between various actors. Additionally, Turkey's president and longtime leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears to be concerned that the United States and some other Western countries harbor sympathies for some of the groups that have been marginalized domestically under Erdogan. Also, Turkey has played a larger role in the Middle East since the 2000s, but has faced a number of setbacks and has problematic relations with Israel and most Sunni Arab countries other than Qatar.

Bilateral relations between the Trump Administration and the Erdogan government have been difficult, but have improved somewhat since October 2018 when a Turkish court allowed Pastor Andrew Brunson to return to the United States after a two-year imprisonment. The following are current points of tension in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

F-35 aircraft acquisition endangered by possible S-400 acquisition from Russia. Turkey's planned purchase of an S-400 air defense system from Russia could trigger U.S. sanctions under existing law and decrease Turkey's chances of acquiring U.S.-origin F-35 aircraft. The possible S-400 transaction has sparked broader concern over Turkey's relationship with Russia and implications for NATO. U.S. officials seek to prevent the deal by offering Patriot air defense systems as an alternative to the S-400.

Syria and the Kurds. Turkey's political stances and military operations in Syria have fed U.S.-Turkey tensions, particularly regarding Kurdish-led militias supported by the United States against the Islamic State over Turkey's strong objections. President Trump's announcement in December 2018 that U.S. troops would withdraw from Syria came after a call with President Erdogan in which Erdogan accepted responsibility for countering the Islamic State in Syria. Efforts to coordinate U.S. and Turkish actions related to a U.S. withdrawal have triggered debate about the possible consequences of Turkish intervention in northeast Syria, especially for those Kurdish-led militias, which have links with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). The PKK is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that originated in Turkey and wages an on-and-off insurgency against the Turkish government while using safe havens in both Syria and Iraq.

Congressional initiatives. Within the tense bilateral context, the 115th Congress required the Trump Administration—in the FY2019 John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 115-232)—to report on the status of U.S.-Turkey relations, with particular emphasis on the possible S-400 deal and its implications. The Department of Defense (DOD) submitted a mostly classified report to Congress in November 2018. Appropriations legislation proposed for FY2019 in the 116th Congress (H.R. 648) would require an update to the DOD report.

Turkey's domestic trajectory and financial distress. President Erdogan rules in an increasingly authoritarian manner, with his power further consolidated in June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. A number of developments (a globally stronger dollar, rule of law concerns and political uncertainty, significant corporate debt) led to a precipitous drop in the value of Turkey's currency during 2018. A major September 2018 interest rate hike by Turkey's central bank helped reverse some of the currency's downward slide, but concerns remain about Turkey's financial position and the possible consequences that higher interest rates might have for economic growth. Local elections are scheduled for March 2018 against the backdrop of these economic concerns.

The next steps in relations between the United States and Turkey will take place with Turkey facing a number of political and economic challenges. Given Erdogan's consolidation of power, observers now question how he will govern a polarized electorate and deal with the foreign actors who can affect Turkey's financial solvency, regional security, and political influence. U.S. officials and lawmakers can refer to Turkey's complex history, geography, domestic dynamics, and international relationships in evaluating how to encourage Turkey to align its policies with U.S. interests.

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Introduction

This report provides background information and analysis on the following topics:

- Various aspects of U.S.-Turkey relations, including (1) Turkey's strategic orientation; (2) U.S./NATO cooperation and how a Turkish purchase of an S-400 air defense system from Russia could endanger its acquisition of U.S.-origin F-35 aircraft; (3) the situation in northern Syria, including with Kurdish-led militias; (4) criminal cases of note since the failed 2016 coup attempt in Turkey; and (5) congressional proposals.
- Domestic Turkish developments, including politics under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's largely authoritarian and polarizing rule (with local elections scheduled for March 2019), and significant economic concerns.

For additional information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

Figure 1. Turkey at a Glance

Geography	*Area:* 783,562 sq km (302,535 sq. miles), slightly larger than Texas
People	*Population:* 81,257,239 (2018) Most populous cities: Istanbul 14.8 mil, Ankara 5.3 mil, Izmir 4.2 mil, Bursa 2.9 mil, Antalya 2.3 mil (2016) *% of Population 14 or Younger:* 24.2% *Ethnic Groups:* Turks 70%-75%; Kurds 19%; Other minorities 7%-12% (2016) *Religion:* Muslim 99.8% (mostly Sunni), Others (mainly Christian and Jewish) 0.2% *Literacy:* 95.6% (male 98.6%, female 92.6%) (2015)

Economy	*GDP Per Capita (at purchasing power parity):* $27,899
	Real GDP Growth: 3.1%
	Inflation: 20.2%
	Unemployment: 11.0%
	Budget Deficit as % of GDP: 1.9%
	Public Debt as % of GDP: 28.0%
	Current Account Deficit as % of GDP: 4.5%
	International reserves: $87 billion

Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated by Hannah Fischer using Department of State Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); ArcWorld (2014); DeLorme (2014). Fact information (2018 estimates unless otherwise specified) from International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database; Turkish Statistical Institute; World Bank; Economist Intelligence Unit; and Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*.

U.S.-Turkey Relations

Turkey's Strategic Orientation in Question

Numerous points of bilateral tension have raised questions within the United States and Turkey about the two countries' alliance. Turkish actions and statements on a number of foreign policy issues have contributed to problems with the United States and its other NATO allies, fueling concern about Turkey's commitment to NATO and Western orientation. For its part, Turkey may bristle because it feels like it is treated as a junior partner, and may seek greater foreign policy diversification through stronger relationships with more countries.[1] In the months since the apparent October 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate, some observers speculate that President Erdogan has sought to use information from the event to gain leverage in Turkey's dealings with the United States, and to boost Turkey's regional and global profile.[2]

A number of considerations drive the complicated dynamics behind Turkey's international relationships. Turkey's history as both a regional power and an object of great power aggression translates into wide popularity for nationalistic political actions and discourse. This nationalistic sentiment might make some Turks wary of Turkey's partial reliance on other key countries (for example, the United States for security, European Union countries for trade and investment, and Russia and Iran for energy). Moreover, Turkey's cooperative relationships with countries whose respective interests may conflict involves a balancing act. Turkey's vulnerability to threats from Syria and Iraq increases the pressure on it to manage this balance.[3] Involvement in Syria and Iraq by the United States, Russia, and Iran further complicates Turkey's situation. Additionally, grievances that President Erdogan and his supporters espouse against seemingly marginalized domestic foes (the military and secular elite who previously dominated Turkey, the Fethullah

[1] Asli Aydintasbas and Jeremy Shapiro, "The U.S. and Turkey have bigger problems than their erratic leaders," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2019; Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Erdogan: How Turkey Sees the Crisis With the U.S.," *New York Times*, August 10, 2018; Umut Uzer, "The Revival of Ottomanism in Turkish Foreign Policy: 'The World Is Greater Than Five,'" *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, March 21, 2018.

[2] See, e.g., Brandon Friedman, "The Khashoggi Affair: Whither the Kingdom," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 12, 2018.

[3] See, e.g., Gonul Tol and Birol Baskan, "From 'hard power' to 'soft power' and back again: Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East," Middle East Institute, November 29, 2018.

Gulen movement, Kurdish nationalists, and liberal activists) extend to the United States and Europe due to apparent suspicions of Western sympathies for these foes.

Turkey's Middle Eastern profile expanded in the 2000s as Erdogan (while serving as prime minister) sought to build economic and political linkages—often emphasizing shared Muslim identity—with Turkey's neighbors. However, efforts to increase Turkey's influence and offer it as a "model" for other regional states appear to have been set back by a number of developments since 2011: (1) conflict and instability that engulfed the region and Turkey's own southern border, (2) Turkey's failed effort to help Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups gain lasting power in Syria and North Africa, and (3) domestic polarization accompanied by government repression. Although Turkey shares some interests with traditional Sunni Arab powers Saudi Arabia and Egypt in countering Iran, these countries' leaders regard Turkey suspiciously because of the Turkish government's Islamist sympathies and close relationship with Qatar.[4] Turkey maintains relations with Israel, but these have become distant and—at times—contentious during Erdogan's rule.

U.S./NATO Cooperation with Turkey

Overview

Turkey's location near several global hotspots makes the continuing availability of its territory for the stationing and transport of arms, cargo, and personnel valuable for the United States and NATO. From Turkey's perspective, NATO's traditional value has been to mitigate its concerns about encroachment by neighbors. Turkey initially turned to the West largely as a reaction to aggressive post-World War II posturing by the Soviet Union. In addition to Incirlik air base near the southern Turkish city of Adana, other key U.S./NATO sites include an early warning missile defense radar in eastern Turkey and a NATO ground forces command in Izmir. Turkey also controls access to and from the Black Sea through its straits pursuant to the Montreux Convention of 1936.

Current tensions have fueled discussion from the U.S. perspective about the advisability of continued U.S./NATO use of Turkish bases. Reports in 2018 suggested that some Trump Administration officials were contemplating significant reductions in the U.S. presence in Turkey.[5] There are historical precedents for such changes. On a number of occasions, the United States has withdrawn military assets from Turkey or Turkey has restricted U.S. use of its territory or airspace. These include the following:

- **1962 - Cuban Missile Crisis.** The United States withdrew its nuclear-tipped Jupiter missiles from Turkey as part of the secret deal to end this crisis with the Soviet Union.
- **1975 - Cyprus.** Turkey closed most U.S. defense and intelligence installations in Turkey during the U.S. arms embargo that Congress imposed in response to Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus.
- **2003 - Iraq.** A Turkish parliamentary vote did not allow the United States to open a second front from Turkey in the Iraq war.

[4] See, e.g., Jeffrey Feltman, et al., "The new geopolitics of the Middle East: America's role in a changing region," Brookings Institution, January 2019.

[5] Gordon Lubold, Felicia Schwartz, and Nancy A. Youssef, "U.S. Pares Back Use of Turkish Base Amid Strains with Ankara," *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2018.

Some of the plotters of an unsuccessful coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 apparently used Incirlik air base, causing temporary disruptions of some U.S. military operations. This may have eroded some trust between the two countries, while also raising U.S. questions about Turkey's stability and the safety and utility of Turkish territory for U.S. and NATO assets. As a result of these questions and U.S.-Turkey tensions, some observers have advocated exploring alternative basing arrangements in the region.[6]

The cost to the United States of finding a replacement for Incirlik and other sites in Turkey would likely depend on a number of variables including the functionality and location of alternatives, where future U.S. military engagements may happen, and the political and economic difficulty involved in moving or expanding U.S. military operations elsewhere. While an August 2018 report cited a Department of Defense (DOD) spokesperson as saying that the United States is not leaving Incirlik,[7] some reports suggest that expanded or potentially expanded U.S. military presences in Greece and Jordan might be connected with concerns about Turkey.[8]

Calculating the costs and benefits to the United States of a U.S./NATO presence in Turkey, and of potential changes in U.S./NATO posture, revolves to a significant extent around three questions:

- To what extent does strengthening Turkey relative to other regional actors serve U.S. interests?
- To what extent does the United States rely on the use of Turkish territory or airspace to secure and protect U.S. interests?
- To what extent does Turkey rely on U.S./NATO support, both politically and functionally, for its security and regional influence?

F-35 Aircraft Acquisition Endangered by Possible S-400 Acquisition from Russia

Turkey's plans to take delivery of an S-400 air defense system from Russia sometime in 2019 could hamper its acquisition of U.S.-origin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft.[9] Turkey is a member of the international consortium that has developed the F-35, and plans to purchase 100 of the

[6] Aaron Stein, "Bilateral Basing Squabbles: Incirlik and America's Out of Area Wars," Atlantic Council, August 29, 2018; Testimony of Steven Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing, September 6, 2017.

[7] Nimet Kirac, "US-Turkey cooperation against Islamic State ongoing, Pentagon says," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, August 27, 2018.

[8] Nektaria Stamouli, "Athens, Once Wary, Welcomes The U.S. Military," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2019; Joseph Trevithick, "Docs Show US To Massively Expand Footprint At Jordanian Air Base Amid Spats With Turkey, Iraq," The Drive, January 14, 2019.

[9] Media reports indicate that the S-400 deal, if finalized, would be worth approximately $2.5 billion. Tuvan Gumrukcu and Ece Toksabay, "Turkey, Russia sign deal on supply of S-400 missiles," Reuters, December 29, 2017. According to this article, the portion of the purchase price not paid for up front (55%) would be financed by a Russian loan.

aircraft.[10] Training on the F-35 for Turkish pilots is now underway on U.S. soil,[11] and the first aircraft is reportedly scheduled to leave the United States for Turkey sometime in 2020.[12]

S-400 Deal and Implications for NATO

Turkey justified its preliminary decision to acquire S-400s instead of U.S. or European alternatives by claiming that it turned to Russia because NATO allies rebuffed its attempts to purchase an air defense system from them.[13] Turkey has also cited various practical reasons, including cost, technology sharing, and territorial defense coverage.[14] However, one analysis from December 2017 asserted that the S-400 deal would not involve technology transfer, would not defend Turkey from ballistic missiles (because the system would not have access to NATO early-warning systems), and could weaken rather than strengthen Turkey's geopolitical position by increasing Turkish dependence on Russia.[15]

For some observers, the S-400 issue raises the possibility that Russia could take advantage of U.S.-Turkey friction to undermine the NATO alliance.[16] Previously, in 2013, Turkey reached a preliminary agreement to purchase a Chinese air and missile defense system, but later (in 2015) withdrew from the deal, perhaps partly due to concerns voiced within NATO, as well as China's reported reluctance to share technology.[17]

Possible Impact on F-35 Transaction

While U.S. officials express desires to avoid disruptions to the F-35's manufacture and rollout, they also express concern that Turkey's potential operation of the S-400 alongside the F-35 could compromise sensitive technology. According to one analysis, "the Pentagon fears that Turkey's operation of the S-400 would allow the Russian military to study how the F-35 stealth fighters [show up on] Russian-built air defense radars, and potentially facilitate the infiltration of [the F-

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[10] A 2007 memorandum of understanding among the consortium participants is available at https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/102378.pdf, and an earlier 2002 U.S.-Turkey agreement is available at https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/196467.pdf. For information on the consortium and its members, see CRS Report RL30563, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program*, by Jeremiah Gertler. For details on Turkish companies' participation in the F-35 program, see https://www.f35.com/global/participation/turkey-industrial-participation.

[11] Dylan Malyasov, "Source: Turkey to receive first F-35 Lightning II fighter jet on June 21," Defence Blog, June 5, 2018; Sarp Ozer and Ahmet Sultan Usul, "First F-35 jet delivery to Turkey slated for June 21," Anadolu Agency, May 11, 2018.

[12] Aaron Stein, "The Clock is Ticking: S-400 and the Future of F-35 in Turkey," Atlantic Council, July 24, 2018.

[13] Sebastian Sprenger, "Turkey defiant on purchase of Russian S-400 anti-missile system," *Defense News*, July 11, 2018.

[14] Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey makes deal to buy Russian-made S-400 air defense system," *Defense News*, December 27, 2017; Umut Uras, "Turkey's S-400 purchase not a message to NATO: official," Al Jazeera, November 12, 2017. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu insisted in February 2018 that Turkey needs additional air defense coverage "as soon as possible," and referenced previous withdrawals of Patriot systems by NATO allies. State Department website, Remarks by Cavusoglu, Press Availability with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Ankara, Turkey, February 16, 2018.

[15] Gonul Tol and Nilsu Goren, "Turkey's Quest for Air Defense: Is the S-400 Deal a Pivot to Russia?" Middle East Institute, December 2017.

[16] See, e.g., Kemal Kirisci and Seckin Kostem, "Don't let Russian S-400s peel Turkey away from the West," Brookings Institution, December 18, 2018; Yaroslav Trofimov, "Russia, Turkey Forge a Tactical Bond," *Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2018.

[17] "Turkey confirms cancellation of $3.4 billion missile defence project awarded to China," Reuters, November 18, 2015.

35] computer system. This could compromise the F-35's effectiveness around the world."[18] According to one Turkish press report, Turkey has taken a step intended to assuage U.S. concerns by insisting on an arrangement that allows Turkish technicians to operate the S-400 without Russian involvement, and Turkey may also allow U.S. officials to examine the S-400.[19]

How Changing Turkey's Role in the F-35 Consortium Might Affect the Program

Because the F-35 program is multinational, unwinding Turkey's involvement could present financial and logistical challenges. In May 2018, two Members of Congress circulated a letter to other Members expressing concern about Turkey but opposing its exclusion from the F-35 program. According to these two Members:

> As of January 2018, Turkey had contributed over $1 billion to the program. This investment would be required to be returned to the Turkish Government if the United States fails to deliver on the contract. Even more significantly, Turkey manufactures critical components of the F-35. Removing them from the program will lead to delays and [cost] overruns to the rest of the partners and allies.[20]

In a July 2018 letter to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis agreed with congressional concerns about "the authoritarian drift in Turkey and its impact on human rights and rule of law." Nevertheless, Secretary Mattis said that if "the Turkish supply chain was disrupted today, it would result in an aircraft production break, delaying delivery of 50-75 jets and would take approximately 18-24 months to re-source parts."[21]

Congress has enacted legislation that has subjected the F-35 transfer to greater scrutiny. Under Section 1282 of the FY2019 John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232), DOD submitted a report to Congress in November 2018 on a number of issues affecting U.S.-Turkey defense cooperation, including the S-400 and F-35.[22]

Much of the report was classified, but an unclassified summary said that the U.S. government has told Turkey that purchasing the S-400 would have "unavoidable negative consequences for U.S.-Turkey bilateral relations, as well as Turkey's role in NATO," including:

- potential sanctions against Turkey under Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, P.L. 115-44);
- risk to Turkish participation in the F-35 program (both aircraft acquisition and industrial workshare);
- risk to other potential U.S. arms transfers to Turkey, and to broader bilateral defense industrial cooperation;
- reduction in NATO interoperability; and
- introduction of "new vulnerabilities from Turkey's increased dependence on Russia for sophisticated military equipment."[23]

[18] Sebastien Roblin, "Congress Temporarily Banned Sale of F-35 Jets to Turkey (But Turkish Pilots Are Still Training to Fly Them)," nationalinterest.org, September 2, 2018.

[19] Ragip Soylu, "Turkey extends S-400 offer to Washington," *Daily Sabah*, June 27, 2018.

[20] The text of the letter is available at http://dearcolleague.us/2018/05/support-the-f-35-joint-strike-fighter-program/.

[21] Anthony Capaccio and Roxana Tiron, "Mattis Urges Congress Not to Hit Turkey with Lockheed F-35 Ban," Bloomberg, July 19, 2018.

[22] "Pentagon report on Turkey's F-35 program delivered to Congress," Reuters, November 15, 2018.

[23] Department of Defense, FY19 NDAA Sec 1282 Report, Status of the U.S. Relationship with the Republic of Turkey, Unclassified Executive Summary, November 26, 2018.

U.S. Offer of Patriot System as Alternative to S-400

In July 2018, a State Department official confirmed ongoing U.S. efforts to persuade Turkey to purchase a Patriot air defense system instead of an S-400.[24] However, in October 2018, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said that talks with U.S. and European air defense system suppliers had "not yielded desired results," and announced plans for Turkey to begin deploying the S-400 in October 2019.[25] Previously, Turkish officials had indicated some concern about whether Congress would approve a Patriot sale,[26] perhaps because of some congressional opposition for other arms sales to Turkey.[27]

The unclassified summary of the November 2018 DOD report to Congress indicated that U.S. officials were continuing to offer a Patriot system to Turkey:

> The Administration has developed an alternative package to provide Turkey with a strong, capable, NATO-interoperable air and missile defense system that meets all of Turkey's defense requirements. Parts of the package require Congressional Notification. Congressional support for Foreign Military Sales and Direct Commercial Sales to Turkey is essential to provide a real alternative that would encourage Turkey to walk away from a damaging S-400 acquisition.[28]

In December 2018, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notified Congress that "the State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale [FMS] of eighty (80) Patriot MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced Missiles (GEM-T) missiles, sixty (60) PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement (MSE) missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of $3.5 billion."[29]

Reportedly, discussions between U.S. and Turkish officials over a Patriot sale are ongoing. Turkish officials have stated their intention to proceed with the S-400 purchase regardless of how negotiations over the Patriot sale proceed.[30] In 2009, DSCA notified Congress of a possible FMS to Turkey of Patriot missiles and associated equipment,[31] but the countries did not enter into a transaction for that equipment. Since 2007, Turkey has solicited a number of outside bids to sell it an air defense system, but has not finalized a transaction to date.

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[24] "U.S. in Talks with Turkey to Sell Patriot Missile System to Block Russian Purchase," Reuters, July 16, 2018.

[25] Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey defense minister announces timeline for S-400 deployment," *Defense News*, October 26, 2018.

[26] Kerry Herschelman, "US discourages Turkey from buying S-400s," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 19, 2018.

[27] Josh Lederman, "US nixes proposal to let Turkey guards buy guns," Associated Press, September 18, 2017; "U.S. said to have canceled drone delivery to Turkey," UPI, October 22, 2013.

[28] Department of Defense, FY19 NDAA Sec 1282 Report, Status of the U.S. Relationship with the Republic of Turkey, Unclassified Executive Summary, November 26, 2018.

[29] Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Turkey – Patriot Missile System and Related Support and Equipment," December 18, 2018.

[30] "US delegation holds two-day Patriot talks in Ankara," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 16, 2019.

[31] Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Turkey – PATRIOT Advanced Capability-3 Guided Missiles," September 9, 2009.

Syria

Background

Turkey's involvement in Syria's conflict since 2011 has been complicated and costly. During that time, Turkey's priorities in Syria appear to have evolved. While Turkey still officially calls for Syrian President Bashar al Asad to leave power, it has engaged in a mix of coordination and competition with Russia and Iran (Asad's supporters) on some matters since intervening militarily in Syria starting in August 2016. Turkey may be seeking to protect its borders, project influence, promote commerce, and counter other actors' regional ambitions.

Turkey's chief objective has been to thwart the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from establishing an autonomous area along Syria's northern border with Turkey. The YPG has links with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that for decades has waged an on-and-off insurgency against the Turkish government while using safe havens in both Syria and Iraq. Turkey appears to view the YPG and its political counterpart, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as the top threat to its security, given the boost the YPG/PYD's military and political success could provide to the PKK's insurgency within Turkey.[32] The YPG plays a leading role in the umbrella group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also includes Arabs and other non-Kurdish elements.

Since 2014, the SDF has been the main U.S. ground force partner against the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL). Even though Turkey is also a part of the anti-IS coalition, U.S. operations in support of the SDF—largely based from Turkish territory—has fueled U.S.-Turkey tension because of Turkey's view of the YPG as a threat.[33] As part of SDF operations to expel the Islamic State from the Syrian city of Raqqah in 2017, the U.S. government pursued a policy of arming the YPG directly while preventing the use of such arms against Turkey,[34] and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis announced an end to the direct arming of the YPG near the end of the year.[35] Following the Raqqah operation, U.S. officials contrasted their longstanding alliance with Turkey with their current but temporary cooperation with the YPG.[36]

After Turkey moved against IS-held territory in northern Syria as a way to prevent the YPG from consolidating its rule across much of the border area between the two countries (Operation Euphrates Shield, August 2016-March 2017), Turkey launched an offensive directly against the YPG in the Afrin province in January 2018. In Afrin and the other areas Turkey has occupied since 2016 with the help of allied Syrian opposition militias (see **Figure 2** below), Turkey has

[32] See, e.g., Selim Sazak, "Don't Blame Everything on Erdogan," foreignpolicy.com, January 10, 2019.

[33] U.S. military commanders have generally differentiated between the YPG and the PKK, but in February 2018, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats submitted written testimony to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence stating that the YPG was the Syrian militia of the PKK. Daniel R. Coats, Director of National Intelligence, Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing, February 13, 2018.

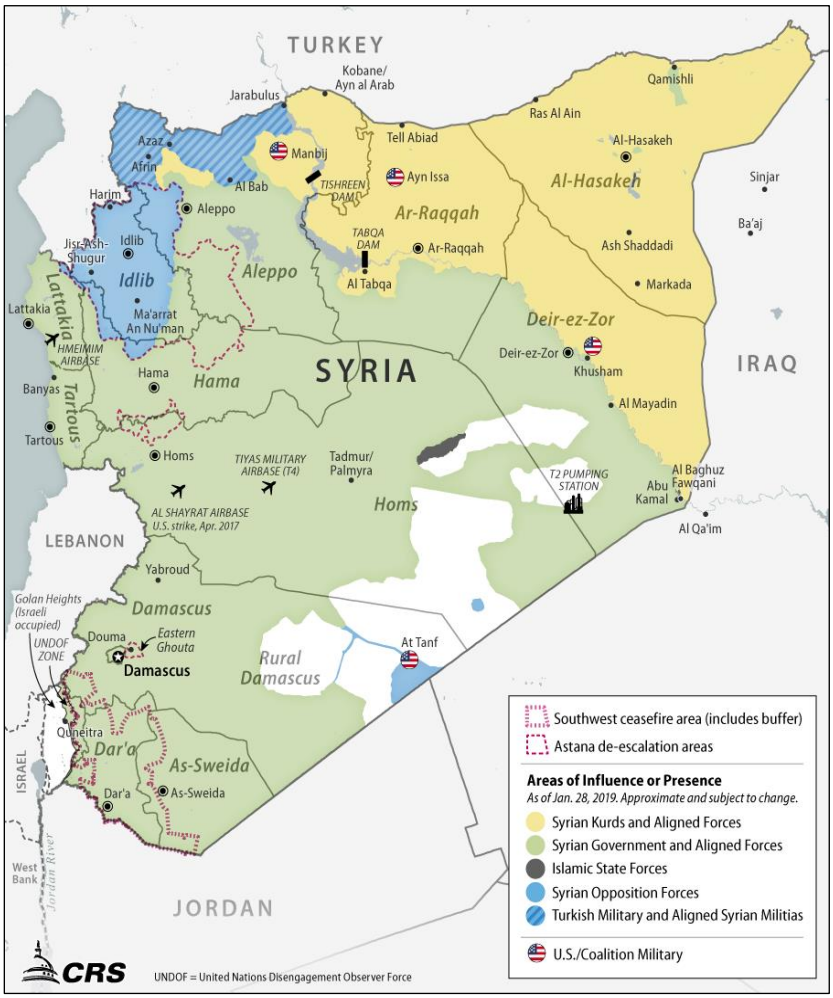
[34] Pentagon statement quoted in Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects," *New York Times*, May 9, 2017; Anne Barnard and Patrick Kingsley, "Arming Syrian Kurds Could Come at a Cost," *New York Times*, May 11, 2017.

[35] Lead Inspector General Report to the U.S. Congress, *Overseas Contingency Operations: Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines*, October 1, 2017-December 31, 2017, p. 25.

[36] Selva Unal, "US determined to keep its word about YPG in Manbij, official says," *Daily Sabah*, March 1, 2018.

organized local councils and invested in infrastructure.[37] Questions persist about how deeply Turkey will influence future governance in these areas.

Figure 2. Northern Syria: Areas of Control



Sources: CRS, based on data from IHS Conflict Monitor, UN OCHA, and Esri.

Note: All designations are approximate and subject to change.

Implications of Announced U.S. Withdrawal

President Trump's announcement in December 2018 that the United States would withdraw approximately 2,000 U.S. troops stationed in Syria has major implications for Turkey and the YPG. The announcement came shortly after a call between Presidents Trump and Erdogan, during which Trump reportedly accepted Erdogan's offer to take responsibility for countering the

[37] Aymenn Jaward al Tamimi, "In Syria, It's Either Reconciliation or Annexation," American Spectator Online, August 23, 2018; "From Afrin to Jarabulus: A small replica of Turkey in the north," *Enab Baladi*, August 29, 2018. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report in June 2018 alleging possible violations by the de facto authorities of international humanitarian and human rights laws—including actions or omissions that prevent Kurds from returning to their homes. U.N. OHCHR, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria," Monthly Human Rights Digest, June 2018.

Islamic State in Syria.[38] U.S. officials have been cited as saying that U.S. troops will redeploy from Syria by summer 2019.[39]

How a U.S. withdrawal would happen remains unclear, as does how Turkey and the many other actors in Syria would respond. Turkey has refused to agree to a demand from National Security Advisor John Bolton to guarantee the YPG's safety, with Erdogan insisting that Turkey should have a free hand with the YPG and other groups it considers to be terrorists.[40] In January, amid reports that the U.S. military had begun preparing for withdrawal,[41] President Trump tweeted that he would "devastate Turkey economically" if it hit the Kurds, and at the same time proposed the creation of a 20-mile deep "safe zone" on the Syria side of the border.[42] Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later said that the U.S. "twin aims" are to make sure that those who helped take down the IS caliphate have security, and to prevent terrorists from attacking Turkey out of Syria.[43] Some sources suggest that U.S. officials favor having a Western coalition patrol any kind of buffer zone inside the Syrian border, with some U.S. support, while Turkey wants its forces and Syrian rebel partners to take that role.[44]

Syrian Refugees in Turkey

In addition to its ongoing military activities in Syria, Turkey hosts about 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees—more than any other country. Turkish officials estimate that they have spent approximately $30 billion on refugee assistance.[45] According to these official estimates, the Syrian refugee population in Turkey increased in 2018 even though around 291,000 refugees returned to Syria.[46]

With the large-scale return of refugees to Syria uncertain, Turkey has focused on how to manage their presence in Turkish society by addressing their legal status, basic needs, employment, education, and impact on local communities.[47] Problems in the Turkish economy may be fueling some negative views of the refugees among Turkish citizens—especially in areas where refugees are concentrated—and some violence between the two groups has been reported.[48]

Uncertainty surrounding the announced U.S. withdrawal from northeast Syria also applies to how Turkish forces might operate there. One analyst calculates that additional Turkish military intervention might focus on areas, such as Tal Abyad (aka Tell Abiad), that are less historically Kurdish than others, in an effort to reduce the YPG's control over territorially contiguous

[38] Orhan Coskun and Lesley Wroughton, "Syrian surprise: How Trump's phone call changed the war," Reuters, December 28, 2018.

[39] Gordon Lubold and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Woos Allies for a Syrian Buffer Zone," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2019.

[40] Steve Holland and Orhan Coskun, "Turkey's Erdogan rebukes Trump's top security adviser over Kurds in Syria," Reuters, January 8, 2019.

[41] Nancy A. Yousef and Dion Nissenbaum, "U.S. Starts Moving Materiel Out of Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2019.

[42] Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, January 13, 2019, 2:53 p.m., https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1084584259510304768.

[43] Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Remarks to Traveling Press, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, January 14, 2019.

[44] Lubold and Gordon, op. cit. footnote 39; Semih Idiz, "Erdogan-Putin summit highlights differences over Syria," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 25, 2019.

[45] Semih Idiz, "Debate over Syrian refugees gathers steam in Turkey," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 11, 2019.

[46] Ibid.

[47] See, e.g., Laura Batalla and Juliette Tolay, *Toward Long-Term Solidarity with Syrian Refugees? Turkey's Policy Response and Challenges*, Atlantic Council, September 2018.

[48] Idiz, op. cit. footnote 45; Stephen Starr, "Syrians in Turkey face anger and violence," *Irish Times*, November 7, 2018; International Crisis Group, "Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions," January 29, 2018.

regions.[49] Some observers express doubts that Turkish-supported militias would be able to counter the Islamic State as effectively as the YPG-led SDF,[50] and one journalist has stated concerns about what could happen to the IS foreign fighters held by the SDF if Turkey clashes with the YPG.[51] Turkish officials have requested U.S. air and logistical support for their potential operations, despite the two countries' different stances on the YPG.[52] In a *New York Times* column in January, President Erdogan envisioned that if Turkish-backed forces gain control of predominantly Kurdish areas in Syria currently under YPG rule, these regions would be run by popularly elected local councils advised by Turkish officials.[53] Various analyses surmise that a U.S. troop withdrawal would lead the YPG toward an accommodation with Russia and the Syrian government.[54] A reference by Russian President Vladimir Putin to the 1998 Adana Protocol between Turkey and Syria suggests that Russia may seek to limit direct Turkish involvement in Syria under the premise that Syria's government would take greater responsibility for constraining YPG actions.[55]

How U.S.-Turkey coordination plays out in northeastern Syria could influence Turkey's presence in western Syria, particularly in key contested areas like the town of Manbij and Idlib province. Russia and the Syrian government have sent forces near Manbij, possibly as a check on Turkish personnel there who are intent on eradicating YPG influence from the town.[56] In Idlib, Turkey-backed forces stationed at points around the province appear to have failed to prevent territorial gains by Al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) jihadists who also oppose the Syrian government. The HTS gains in Idlib may lead to a Russian-backed Syrian military operation there with the potential for new refugee flows to Turkey.[57]

Various Criminal Cases After 2016 Coup Attempt

A number of cases involving criminal allegations or detentions have generated controversy between the United States and Turkey since the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Shortly after the attempt, Turkey's government called for the extradition of Fethullah Gulen (the U.S.-based former cleric whom Turkey's government has accused of involvement in the plot), and the matter remains pending before U.S. officials.[58] Since the coup attempt, sharp criticism of U.S. actions related to Gulen's case has significantly increased in Turkish media. Additionally, Turkey's

[49] Fabrice Balanche, "Tal Abyad: Achilles Heel of the Syrian Kurdish Belt," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch 3059, December 21, 2018.

[50] Aaron Stein, "The Scramble for Northeast Syria." foreignaffairs.com, January 22, 2019; Simon Waldman, "Trump Made a Fatal Error. Turkey Is Incapable of Taking on ISIS, Even if Erdogan Wanted To," haaretz.com, January 10, 2019.

[51] David Ignatius, "Trump's Perilous Withdrawal from Syria," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2019.

[52] Michael R. Gordon, et al., "Turkey Seeks U.S. Aid in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2019.

[53] Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Erdogan: Trump Is Right on Syria. Turkey Can Get the Job Done," *New York Times*, January 8, 2019.

[54] "Intel: Why Turkey is threatening Damascus after Manbij attack," *Al-Monitor*, January 18, 2019; Steven A. Cook, "Syria's Changing Power Grid: What Turkey Wants," Council on Foreign Relations, December 21, 2018.

[55] Micha'el Tanchum, "The Adana Protocol Re-Emerges as Russia and Arab Nations Align Against Turkey's Syrian Intervention," Turkey Analyst, January 24, 2019.

[56] Idiz, op. cit. footnote 45.

[57] Ibid.

[58] CRS In Focus IF10444, *Fethullah Gulen, Turkey, and the United States: A Reference*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas. For information on Turkish allegations about Gulen's link to the coup plot, see Carlotta Gall, "104 Turks Get Life Terms for Failed Coup," *New York Times*, May 23, 2018.

government has dismissed around 130,000 Turks from government posts,[59] detained more than 60,000,[60] and taken over or closed various businesses, schools, and media outlets.[61] The government's measures appear to have targeted many who are not connected with Gulen.[62]

As part of Turkish authorities' post-coup crackdown, they detained Pastor Andrew Brunson (who was released, after a two-year imprisonment, in October 2018) and a number of other U.S. citizens (most of them dual U.S.-Turkish citizens), along with Turkish employees of the U.S. government.[63] Reports suggest that Congress and the State Department are trying to obtain the release of those currently detained, though the Administration lifted sanctions on senior Turkish officials following Pastor Brunson's release.[64]

Separately, two prominent Turkish citizens with government ties were arrested by U.S. authorities in 2016 and 2017 for conspiring to evade sanctions on Iran. One, Reza Zarrab, received immunity for cooperating with prosecutors, while the other, Mehmet Hakan Atilla, was convicted and sentenced in May 2018 to 32 months in prison. The case was repeatedly denounced by Turkish leaders, who reportedly expressed concern about the potential implications for Turkey's economy if the case led U.S. officials to impose penalties on Turkish banks.[65] This has not yet happened.

Congressional Proposals

Bilateral tensions contributed to various legislative proposals by Members of Congress during the 115th Congress. The most significant congressional action against Turkey to date has been an arms embargo that Congress enacted in response to Turkish military intervention in Cyprus. That embargo lasted from 1975 to 1978.

In the 116th Congress, the House-passed Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019 (H.R. 648) contains foreign aid provisions that also have been introduced in the Senate Appropriations Committee. Section 7046(d) of H.R. 648 includes the following proposals regarding Turkey:

- **Requiring DOD to update its FY2019 NDAA report to Congress on Turkey's possible S-400 acquisition.** The update, including a detailed description of plans to impose sanctions under CAATSA, is required by November 1, 2019. Until the report is submitted, funding cannot be used to transfer F-35 aircraft to Turkey.
- **Restricting transfer of arms to Turkish Presidential Protection Directorate (TPPD).** This restriction, which is subject to a few exceptions, would apply unless the State Department reports to Congress that members of the TPPD who were involved in a violent incident against protestors during a May 2017 Washington, DC, trip by President Erdogan have been "brought to justice."

[59] Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Events of 2018," World Report 2019.

[60] Kelly Whiteside, "An N.B.A. Star Takes on Erdogan," *New York Times,* January 9, 2019.

[61] Kareem Fahim, "As Erdogan prepares for new term, Turkey dismisses more than 18,000 civil servants," *Washington Post,* July 8, 2018.

[62] Chris Morris, "Reality Check: The numbers behind the crackdown in Turkey," BBC, June 18, 2018. Turkey established a commission in 2017 (based on advice from the Council of Europe) to allow for public officials to appeal their dismissals, and the commission has provided redress to 2,300 people after reviewing about 40% of the appeals. Human Rights Watch, op. cit. footnote 59.

[63] Henri J. Barkey and Eric Edelman, "Fight for these State Department workers detained in Turkey," *Washington Post,* July 29, 2018.

[64] Eli Okun, "'He's still in prison': Trump lifts Turkey sanctions but Americans remain detained," Politico, December 29, 2018.

[65] Adam Klasfeld, "Turkish Markets Brace for Banker's Sentencing in NY," Courthouse News Service, May 11, 2018.

H.R. 648 is less stringent than an earlier FY2019 appropriations bill (S. 3108) from the 115th Congress that would have prohibited transferring F-35s to Turkey if it purchased the S-400, and would have denied entry to senior Turkish officials involved in detaining U.S. citizens.

Domestic Turkish Developments

Political Developments Under Erdogan's Rule

President Erdogan has ruled Turkey since becoming prime minister in 2003. After Erdogan became president in August 2014 via Turkey's first-ever popular presidential election, he claimed a mandate for increasing his power and pursuing a "presidential system" of governance. Analyses of Erdogan sometimes characterize him as one or more of the following: a pragmatic populist, a protector of the vulnerable, a budding authoritarian, an indispensable figure, an Islamic ideologue.[66]

Erdogan's consolidation of power has continued amid domestic and international concerns about growing authoritarianism in Turkey. He outlasted the July 2016 coup attempt, and then scored victories in the April 2017 constitutional referendum and the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections—emerging with the expanded powers he had sought. Some allegations of voter fraud and manipulation surfaced in both elections.[67] U.S. and European Union officials have expressed a number of concerns about rule of law and civil liberties in Turkey,[68] including the government's influence on media[69] and Turkey's reported status as the country with the most journalists in prison.[70]

While there may be some similarities between Turkey under Erdogan and countries like Russia, Iran, or China, some factors distinguish Turkey from them. For example, unlike Russia or Iran, Turkey's economy cannot rely on significant rents from natural resources if foreign sources of revenue or investment dry up. Unlike Russia and China, Turkey does not have nuclear weapons under its command and control. Additionally, unlike all three others, Turkey's economic, political, and national security institutions and traditions have been closely connected with those of the West for decades.

Erdogan is a polarizing figure, with about half the country supporting his rule, and half the country against it. To obtain a parliamentary majority in the June 2018 elections, Erdogan's Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, or AKP) relied on a coalition with the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyet Halk Partisi*, or MHP). The MHP is the country's traditional Turkish nationalist party, and is known for opposing political accommodation with the Kurds. Local elections scheduled for March 2019 could be a significant

[66] See, e.g., "The Erdogan Effect: How One Man Shaped Turkey," CNN Video; Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017; Burak Kadercan, "Erdogan's Last Off-Ramp: Authoritarianism, Democracy, and the Future of Turkey," War on the Rocks, July 28, 2016.

[67] Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Limited Referendum Observation Mission Final Report, Turkey, April 16, 2017 (published June 22, 2017); OSCE, International Election Observation Mission, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Turkey, Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, June 24, 2018 (published June 25, 2018).

[68] See, e.g., State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017, Turkey; European Commission, Turkey 2018 Report, April 17, 2018.

[69] See, e.g., "Turkish Media Group Bought by Pro-Government Conglomerate," *New York Times*, March 22, 2018.

[70] Elana Beiser, "Hundreds of journalists jailed globally becomes the new normal," Committee to Protect Journalists, December 13, 2018.

barometer of domestic support for Erdogan under the difficult economic circumstances described below.

Economic Concerns

The Turkish economy appears to be slowing down, with negative consequences both for consumer demand and for companies seeking or repaying loans in global markets.[71] Economic growth was down from over 7% in 2017 to around 3% in 2018, with forecasts for 2019 at or below 1%.[72] By the end of 2018, inflation had essentially doubled year-on-year to more than 20%. During 2018, the Turkish lira depreciated close to 30% against the dollar in an environment featuring a globally stronger dollar, rule of law concerns and political uncertainty, and significant corporate debt. In August 2018, amid U.S.-Turkey tensions on the Pastor Brunson matter, President Trump announced a doubling of tariffs on Turkish steel and aluminum imports.[73] This prompted retaliatory action from Turkey.[74] The lira plunged in value, but recovered somewhat in the final months of 2018 after Turkey's central bank raised its key interest rate by 6.25% in September.[75] In November 2018, the United States granted Turkey (along with seven other countries) a six-month exception from U.S. sanctions on Iranian oil.

Some observers speculate that Turkey may need to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a financial assistance package.[76] This would be a sensitive challenge for President Erdogan because his political success story is closely connected with helping Turkey become independent from its most recent IMF intervention in the early 2000s.[77] Before the central bank's rate hike in September 2018, some commentators voiced concerns about the bank's independence as Erdogan publicly opposed increasing rates.[78] In January 2019, Turkey's parliament voted to grant Erdogan broader emergency powers in case of a financial crisis.[79]

The government appears to be trying to stimulate growth via familiar measures to boost consumer demand. A former Turkish economic official has claimed that by offloading the "debt crisis of the real sector" onto the banking sector, the government has exacerbated the crisis.[80] In his opinion, a "harsh belt-tightening policy" with or without the IMF is thus inevitable after the March 2018 local elections.[81]

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[71] See, e.g., Asli Kandemir and Cagan Koc, "Lira Has Steadied but Summer Plunge Hangs on Turkish Growth," Bloomberg, December 5, 2018.

[72] Ibid.; IMF World Outlook Database, October 2018.

[73] Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, August 10, 2018, 5:47 a.m., https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1027899286586109955. The formal presidential proclamation only explicitly referred to action on steel tariffs. White House, Presidential Proclamation Adjusting Imports of Steel into the United States, August 10, 2018. Earlier in the year, President Trump had applied new tariffs on steel and aluminum globally, with exceptions for some countries, but not Turkey. Ceyda Caglayan, "U.S. steel tariffs slash Turkey's exports; future orders recovering –association," Reuters, June 27, 2018.

[74] Jethro Mullen, "Turkey ramps up US spat with huge tariffs on cars and other goods," CNN, August 15, 2018.

[75] Kandemir and Koc, op. cit. footnote 70.

[76] "Why some Turkish media rejoice at negative economic data," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, January 16, 2019.

[77] Onur Ant, et al., "Erdogan's Road Map out of Market Meltdown Is Full of U-Turns," Bloomberg, August 8, 2018.

[78] See, e.g., Roger Blitz and Laura Pitel, "Turkey's central bank faces test of independence," *Financial Times*, September 13, 2018.

[79] Firat Kozok, "Erdogan Gets Emergency Powers Over the Turkish Economy," Bloomberg, January 17, 2019.

[80] Ufuk Soylemez, quoted in "Why some Turkish media rejoice at negative economic data," op. cit. footnote 76.

[81] Ibid.

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