

Implications of the Trump Administration 2018 Foreign Policy Decision Regarding the Kurdish  
Situation in North-Western Syria

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## **Introduction to the Kurdish Issue in Conjunction to US Foreign Policy**

Threaded within the contours of the Middle East lies one of the most complicated cases cultural interaction in a contemporary sense: the stateless Kurds. Within this research project, the perception in which this crisis is interpreted between the Kurdish population and the Turkish population within the Middle East is explored. Although the crisis has occurred for decades, a new chapter of the crisis has unfolded within the duration of the Trump administration. Within the previous year, the diplomatic interactions between the United States and the Kurdish population have deteriorated quite rapidly. Consequently, the Kurds who are at a greater risk of state violence have suffered the after-effects of President Trump's decision to sever support for Kurds within Syria. Various states within the region have a complicated relationship with the Kurds, which adds to the difficulty of the situation; these state relationships to the Kurdish population will be addressed and analyzed as one perspective of the crisis. Violence, genocide, and statelessness have plagued the Kurds for decades in the contemporary sense. To untangle this complex issue, the case studies of the Kurdish population in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria will be analyzed at length to understand the intercultural communication failures that have contributed to this crisis.

To keep a considerably lengthy background history succinct, the Kurdish population is a stateless ethnic group of about 25 million that reside primarily within the states of Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq (Wuthrich, 2012). Throughout the post-World War I era to the contemporary contours of the states that exist, the Kurdish populations in these areas had essentially been forgotten, and lost opportunities from the reigning powers to their own state following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. With this fragmentation as the foundation to the ethnic group interaction between the Kurds and the governments within the new state contours, violence and

suppression ensued throughout the following decades (Bengio, 2017). Subsequently, the ethnic and cultural divide of the Kurds from the Turks, Iraqis, and Syrians prompted a clash that turned violent. The cultural reforms of Atatürk in Turkey denying the Kurds of any tie to their roots through means of language, dress, and residence location as a baseline began a lineage of regional distrust towards the Kurds (Resch, 2017). Amid these deep-seated issues, the United States provided their foreign policy measures as a means to support the Kurds; as one of “superpowers” on the global stage, the United States provided a significant amount of protection and support against antagonistic forces in the region for the Kurds.

These contextual pieces come together to provide the basis behind the most pivotal development in the contemporary era of the Kurdish crisis: President Trump’s redaction of support for the Kurds during the Syrian Civil Conflict. As Syrian and dissenting forces (including Syrian rebels and Turkish-Kurds) clash in dispute, the geographic location of the Kurdish troops lends itself for further discord. Therefore, the major crisis at hand lies in the Turkish reaction to the newly abandoned Kurds in the midst of a Turkish movement towards authoritarianism.

This issue is one that is not necessarily on the frontlines of the global stage. However, this crisis has major implications in a cultural and political sense. Formulated by decades of power struggles, this crisis has percolated into one of the foremost cultural crises in recent developments of political science. Furthermore, there are practical and social reasons that contribute to the importance of this topic. A practical reason for further research into this crisis is to contain the spillover of research into the already tumultuous tensions within the region. The ramifications of state sanctioned violence against an already stateless people will have a negative effect for the populace involved as well as the surrounding areas. Refugees and asylees typically

move towards neighboring states for refuge, although others may navigate towards a refugee camp for placement into a host country. This aspect of the cultural crisis between the Kurds and their respective home state's government is pivotal for public awareness; the reception of individuals fleeing from persecution is an important factor to consider when mitigating this crisis. The public reception towards a group is an integral part of the assimilation process when a refugee moves to a different state. Depending on the disposition of the populace of the host state, the integration of the refugees may benefit or suffer.

Moreover, there are a myriad of scholarly reasons to study this rendition of the Kurdish crisis. In this crisis communication research project, a major focus will center around the evolving relationships of the Kurds with their home state's government, neighboring states, and the formulation of international relationships. Extrapolating context from the decades of conflict and suppression from the home states of the Kurds is an area of comparative politics dating back to at least the end of the first world war. However, as the issue of the "Kurdish question" evolves throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, various regional developments have tested these aforementioned relationships. Historic issues of hostility and repression towards the Kurdish population within Turkey and Iraq have set the stage for the hostility to ensue in the aftermath of the redaction of Trump's support for the Kurds in the current conflict within Syria. Consequently, the academic analysis of this ongoing conflict is an important feature in terms of the intellectual facets of this issue. Analysis from an academic standpoint can offer a background for practical decision-making in response to any further developments within this crisis

## **Literature Review**

One of the most pertinent foreign policy issues within the scope of the Trump administration is that of the United States relationship with the Kurdish population. However, a

pivotal aspect of understanding the degradation of this once strong foreign relationship is the communicative shortcomings of the 2018 foreign policy decision to sever ties militarily with the Kurds. Within a review of several points of literature, varying themes are apparent that indicate a lapse in judgement resulting in an international humanitarian crisis.

A pivotal theme of interest within the chosen literature includes the Turkish relationship to the United States that influences this specific dissolution of foreign policy with the Kurds. As previously noted, the Kurds are spread throughout the Middle Eastern region, primarily located within the four states of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. The Kurdish populations of interest in this capacity are those in Turkey and Syria, particularly in combination of the Syrian Civil Conflict. Although a traditional view of the United States-Turkish relationship has been wrought with turmoil, the evolving relationship between Trump and other foreign leaders has resulted in an increasing amount of “shakeup” on the global stage. In this case, the United States has been a central factor to the Turkish response to the Kurds in both Syria and Turkey in the most recent updates to the Syrian conflict; as Lesser states, “The U.S. Factor has been at the center of Turkey’s policy vis-à-vis the Kurds in Syria...” (Lesser 1). This is a new development in terms of the global communication strategy by proxy of foreign policy, as this indicates a newly formulating dialogue and rhetoric regarding Turkey from a policy perspective. Consequently, this also sends a message of a newly forming rhetoric of the United States towards the policies regarding the Syrian conflict. Initially, the policy formation of the United States regarding Syria in terms of the Kurdish allies was based around positivity: noted by van Zoonen, “[Trump] praised the Kurdish fighters and said he would increase support” (2). This stark contrast between policy positions represents one of the heaviest themes regarding the shortcomings of the Trump administration’s foreign policy from a political standpoint; however, a missing element within

these research points are the cultural context points that make these shortcomings an even deeper schism than the political separations. Differences of culture, the interpretations, and implications are of salience when analyzing these policy decisions and responses between the United States, Turkey, and the Turkish Kurds fighting within the Syrian conflict through the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party).

Another theme in this context is the shift towards authoritarian regimes in both the United States and Turkey, and the consequential effects on the Kurdish population. In the United States, the election of Donald Trump moved the political stature of the United States further “right” along the line of political ideologies. This inherently changes the internal political culture of the United States, as the overall structure had been based upon democracy, and upholding these values is the intended goal of the United States in a domestic and foreign capacity. This is clearly mirrored in the interactions of the foreign policy with Turkey. Parallel to the timeline of Trump’s acquiescence to the presidency, a failed coup occurred in Turkey in an attempt to remove President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from power. As Gunter states in his piece, this coup “occurred whose aftermath has led to drastically changed country conditions that were likely to make the over-all situation in Turkey, including the Turkish problem, much worse... the failed coup gave [Erdogan] an excuse to further his own authoritarian ambitions...” (4). Overall, the corresponding movements towards authoritarianism is a crucial point to understand when extrapolating the cultural posits regarding the severance of foreign ties of support with the Kurds.

Lastly within the chosen literature is the overall theme of political oppression experienced by the Kurds. The Kurdish oppression is a historic struggle encapsulated within each of the four countries in which they reside. The specific areas of concern in this project regard the

treatment of the Kurdish populations in Turkey and Syria. The Turkish government has had a longstanding deterrence to the Kurdish population, essentially wiping out the Kurdish presence from modern day Turkey as a response to the “disloyalty” of the Kurds to the Turks, according to Bengio’s text (24). After the movements towards democratization in Turkey during the 1980’s, a movement for global recognition of the Kurdish population took hold in the region. At this point, the Kurdish populations looking for increased sovereignty “benefitted from [their] ability to find safe havens in the Kurdish areas of Turkey’s neighboring states, particularly Iraq and Syria”, according to Resch’s text (3). These pieces consequently come together to indicate the evolving political stature of the Kurdish populations, and how this context of struggle is essential to understand the massive setback that the US withdrawal of support for the Kurds contained at the time.

Overall, the aforementioned themes and topics within the literature reviewed for the impending final paper indicate a historical and political context that is necessary to piece together the issues that created this crisis in the first place. However, where the research is lacking is the political cultural attributes that affect the over crisis stature and existence. The Kurdish issue within this region has spanned a lengthy timeframe, although the cultural implications of authoritarianism in the midst of suppression through a channel of a changing relationship with other states has not necessarily been explored.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The research process primarily focused on the qualitative pieces within research articles and foreign policy memorandums in terms of the effects of the Trump Administration’s decisions, rather than quantitative data. Consequently, three intertwined takeaways showcase the complex cultural ramifications of the United States: the tone shift within policy extrapolated

through press briefings, elements showcasing the ignorance regarding the historic regional context on behalf of the Trump administration, and the subsequent removal of US troops and ensuing international interpretation of this action.

A component that expands upon the of the communicative shortcomings of the Trump Administration 2018 policy regarding the Kurds is the major shift in tone documented. This tone shift essentially moved the United States foreign stance from allies to essentially a severance of support for the Kurds in US Foreign Policy standards. This tone shift is displayed through contrasting quotes located within foreign policy briefings:

- “I think the Kurds are great people. They’re incredible fighters. They’re wonderful, warm, intelligent—allies, in many cases... I believe they’re great people” (12 July 2018)
- “Well, we are helping [the Kurds] a lot and we’ve been very friendly with them... we have defeated ISIS... and we did it with a lot of help from the Kurds” (27 September 2018)
- “[w]e never gave the Kurds a commitment that we’d stay for the next 400 years and protect them. They’ve been fighting with the Turks for 300 years that people know of. And nobody ever committed, “Gee if you do this, we’re going to do that, and we’re going to stay with you forever.” Nobody ever said that” (21 October 2019)

As seen through the first two excerpts taken from President Trump (before the October 2018 decision to pull United States troops out of the northwestern corridor of Syria), the US and the Kurds were strong allies, particularly pertaining to the fight against Islamic State acquisition of Syrian and Iraqi territory. A 2016 MERI Policy Brief additionally indicated that “the war against



[the Islamic State remains] a top priority for the US under Trump”, while continuing praises in allyship towards the Kurds to further exemplify the close foreign ties between the US and the Kurds (van Zoonen 3). However, the last excerpt (spoken after the decision to remove US troops) essentially showcases the intense shift regarding the status of the United States-Kurdish relationship. Inasmuch, this tone shift clearly exemplifies the political strife of this relationship; however, a critical examination of the cultural shortcomings of the way the United States under the Trump administration handled this global relationship. One of the pivotal cultural concepts to understand is the collectivistic nature of the Kurdish people (Saarinen 3). The collectivistic cultural attributes indicate a closeness in community, both at a local and global level. With an abrupt severance of global ties in this capacity, the collectivistic nature of the Kurds prompts an interpretation of this foreign policy action as a detriment to the global community that had been formulated through this allyship.

A clear historic strife between Turkey and the Kurds has been well documented within the past century. Although conflict existed in all four of the states that housed the Kurdish populations, the primary focus of this research is the historic suppression of Kurdish culture and rights within the contours of Turkey; this context provides insight into the precariousness regarding the ramifications associated with the featured foreign policy decision. As noted within the Bengio text, “In the very early years of the modern state, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk promised autonomy to the Kurds as a reward for their contribution to the Turkish military effort during WWI...” (24); however, upon Turkish independence, this was not the case. Bengio continues this conflicting sentiment by describing the Turkish suppression of Kurdish culture: “The Turkish government’s policies of assimilation, cultural homogenization, and denial suffocated the Kurdish language and destroyed other unique cultural attributes” (24). Consequently, these

actions within the earlier portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century set the foundation for distrust between the Turks and Kurds within Turkey. As Turkey continued to develop their national identity, changing political cultures presented within Turkey in the duration of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. To consolidate a lengthy Turkish political history, the primary focus in this instance revolves around the timeframe from 2015 to 2018; at this point in time, the Turkish political corridor was wrought with internal conflict and sentiments of authoritarianism. As Gunter notes in his text regarding the attempted 2016 coup, Turkish President Erdogan utilizes the momentum of the failed coup to enact further crackdowns on the Kurdish population within Turkey; in this capacity, Kurdish media outlets, Kurdish sympathists (in the eyes of Erdogan), and consolidated violence towards the PKK (Turkish-Kurdistan Workers Party) (Gunter 8). This in turn showcases continued violence in an increasingly authoritarian capacity towards the Kurds on behalf of Turkey concurrent to the American shift towards the political right in the midst of Trump's ascension to the presidency. In a cultural framework, historic context is one of the main contributors to the cultural interactions experienced between communicators. In this case, the strife between the Kurdish populace and the Turkish government has been a longstanding, extensively documented issue. The formulation of policy in this capacity inherently goes against the grain of any attention paid to the historic conflict, with little attempt made to understand the consequential factors of this decision.

Consequently, the removal of most US troops leaves the Kurdish troops, who are also one of the major factors in the Syrian rebel forces success at this point, vulnerable to both Syrian government forces and Turkish government retaliation. This vulnerability results from the lack of cultural and historical sensitivity on part of the United States foreign policy decisions. These two aforementioned facets of this intricate and complicated crisis culminate within the precarious

situation in northwestern Syria. As mentioned previously, the PKK is a central component to the Turkish-Kurdish internal conflict, as well as a primary force in the Syrian civil conflict. However, the interpretation of the PKK is contested—while the US government (previous to October 2018) viewed these Kurdish forces as allies, the Turkish government views these Kurdish forces as a terrorist organization. By this point in October 2018, one of the main locations that the PKK held was the northwestern portion of Syria, neighboring to Turkey. The ramifications of this decision produced shock regionally and globally. This decision to remove the majority of US troops in this region went against the advice of top officials within the Pentagon and Department of State, and Congress; Representative Ruben Gallego (R-AZ) notes that “allowing Turkey to move into northern Syria is one of the most destabilizing moves we can do in the Middle East...The Kurds will never trust America again. They will look for new alliances or independence to protect themselves” (Schmitt, Haberman, Wong). Feelings of abandonment were felt by the Kurds in this capacity, as the United States acted as an additional “critical counterweight to Iran and Russia” to the Kurdish presence in terms of the Syrian civil conflict (Schmitt, Haberman, Wong), as well as a sort of protectorate against the Turkish government. These components joined together leave the Kurds in a vulnerable position both in the sense of their place in the Syrian civil conflict and their cultural relationship within the physical and cross-cultural contours of Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

Upon examination and analysis of the literature, it is clear that the cultural failures in a political capacity bleed into a larger humanitarian issue. Regionally, Turkish-Kurdish and Syrian conflicts are mutually exclusive in terms of foundation and context; however, these conflicts become intertwined in terms of a humanitarian emergency as a result of the 2018 decision to

withdraw troops from the northwestern portion of Syria. The Kurdish population has held a precarious position in the regional environment; while they are vulnerable from a political standpoint, there is a noticeable strength in terms of their military and cultural expression. However, the Kurdish vulnerability became exacerbated by the perceptual environment of sudden abandonment by a global actor once thought to be a strong, consistent ally. In turn, the ties that were perceived through a collectivist cultural lens by the Kurds was interpreted as a massive break in trust—which is of great importance in terms of understanding the cultural facets of this crisis. Consequently, culture shock was felt both globally and domestically through this issue with the Kurds. Neuliep defines culture shock as “the effects associated with the tension and anxiety of entering a new culture, combined with the sensations of loss, confusion, and powerlessness resulting from the forfeiture of cultural norms and social rituals” (Neuliep 403). In terms of the ongoing crisis at hand between the Turks and Kurds concurrent to the Syrian crisis, this was not a move foreseen by much of the global community. This dissonance between what was expected of the United States foreign policy action and what *actually* occurred prompted shock within many global actors, both state and non-state.

Furthermore, this dissonance in terms of the globally felt culture shock stems from the ethnocentrism of this administration. Being a major force of power on the global stage combined with the movement towards authoritarianism leads this crisis to become misinterpreted and become far worse in the lens of humanitarian concern. The United States foreign policy has revolved around a culture of the realist theory in international relations, meaning that power and security are the central components of the policy decisions. However, this decision to remove troops from this area of Syria exemplifies the ethnocentrism exhibited by the Trump administration in this capacity. This decision to withdraw troops from this region in Syria not

only does not take into account the cultural and historic implications of the regional complexities, but also moves away from the traditional realist theory and focuses more on the “wants and desires” of the Trump administration. This parallels the Neuliep text regarding Trump’s ethnocentrism, as it is noted that “highly ethnocentric persons see themselves as superior to persons from different cultures” and are “generally not mindful” (Neuliep 298). Additionally apparent is the lack of incentive in the Trump administration to exercise cultural competence, especially in this situation. Cultural competence is an integral aspect regarding the intercultural communication that is present within foreign interactions, according to Neuliep (422); in many of the foreign interactions between the United States and other countries, the Trump administration has not displayed the necessary components to apply cultural competence to actions taken globally. While interest and sensitivity to other cultural facets in another populace are central to this concept of intercultural competence, these steps were clearly not taken by the Trump administration in the scope of the Kurdish crisis.

This research pertaining to the intercultural communication seen within foreign policy is imperative for the foreign policy of the United States. Foreign policy is the main way in which the United States interacts with the global stage, and is a major component of the relationships with other states and populations worldwide. Taking a critical analysis of a previously precarious situation provides an incentive to become acquainted with the cultural norms of the country the policy will affect. Insomuch, a cultural examination of the norms, behaviors, and customs of a population will benefit not only the United States in terms of foreign relationship building, but also benefit the population of the areas that the foreign policy inevitably affects. This concept will hold salience as the global relationships will experience further change in the upcoming months and years due to the change in presidential administration. Within this impending

change, the policies with Turkey and the Kurds may be reformulated and reconsidered in the Biden administration. As of December 2020, the Biden administration has yet to take office and create changes to the policies and decisions made within the previous four years.

Reflecting on the research conducted in this capacity, a significant limitation for this topic is the broad scope of the Kurdish issue. Because of the varying levels of violence subjected towards this populace within the contours of the states in which they reside, multiple avenues were available to take regarding the overall Kurdish issue. This therefore made the research process somewhat difficult, as the breadth versus depth issue became largely apparent in the early stages of researching this ongoing humanitarian issue. However, this issue of the Kurdish allyship is ever formulating, with opportunities to conduct research regarding the fallout regarding the withdrawal of United States troops. This is especially relevant due to the ongoing status of the Syrian civil war, in which Kurdish troops are still engaged. Additionally, the comparative vantage point could also be utilized to view the communication between other populations without a state for further research, such as the United States communication through foreign policy measures with the Palestinian or Rohingya populations. Intercultural communication engaged through the scope of politics is an important facet of the political interactions experienced by the United States; however, this is not only relegated to state-to-state interaction. The way that the United States interacts on the global stage with non-state actors is an integral aspect of international relations.

Overall, the newest chapter of the Kurdish crisis remains marred by the cultural incompetence fueled by ethnocentrism displayed by the United States, prompting culture shocks throughout the global community. As a result of inconsistencies with tone displayed through foreign policy, ignoring the cultural roots between this already complicated crisis, and rash

decision-making regarding troop withdrawals added further obstacles within any process of solution in the Turkish-Kurdish issue, as well as adding complications to the Syrian conflict.

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