

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

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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.¹ 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.² The US's decision to throw its 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

¹ Truls Hallberg Tønnesen, "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>.

² 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, which he believed was in the US's best interest, observers should not have been surprised.

There has not been any significant academic treatment of the Syrian Kurds' position within the Syrian Civil War that also manages to contextualize the Kurdish communities' position vis-à-vis their historical relationship with the US. The methodology used to compile this thesis attempts to address this void in the current literature by compiling relevant primary and secondary documents, while critically analyzing information to discern the elements that are significant to the history of the US relationship with the Syrian Kurds. In light of the pivotal role of the Syrian Civil War for the Syrian Kurds, this thesis will compare US foreign policy toward the Turkish Kurds with the US posture toward the Syrian Kurds, to avoid the historiographical trap of looking at US foreign policy solely through the lens of the present situation in Syria. This thesis will attempt to answer two questions: what geostrategic considerations have shaped US foreign policy toward the Syrian and Turkish Kurds over the past century? Further, has the US diverged from its underlying realpolitik orientation that it has adhered to since the end of Woodrow Wilson's presidency, when declaring support for the Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS in 2014; or, have recent US policy decisions toward the Syrian Kurds been decided through a primarily pragmatic calculus rather than an idealistic lens?³

The thesis will be separated into two chapters: US foreign policy toward the Kurds in Syria and Turkey prior to the Syrian Civil War in 2011, and during the period following the war's initiation. A historiographical dilemma that is necessarily present within this thesis is the imposition of time constraints in which I will examine only the period from 1919 to 2019. I

³ When discussing the US's underlying realpolitik orientation, it is my intention to consider the US's policies solely with respect to their impact on the Syrian and Turkish Kurds. It is not my intention to broaden the analysis to a general claim about wider US foreign policy.

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 this thesis's purview, I will now outline the events suggesting the presence of an underlying realpolitik orientation within US foreign policy toward the Syrian and Turkish Kurds.

The first chapter will be broken down into five sections: the interwar era, early Cold War, 1970-80s, 1990s, and 2000s. The interwar era includes a discussion of the creation of Mandates in which the victors of WWI, specifically Britain and France, subsumed former Ottoman territory into their respective colonial spheres, on the premise of moving the occupied proto-states toward independence once they were deemed ready for full sovereignty. During the readjustment of political borders in the Middle East pursuant to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that followed the 1919-22 Greco-Turkish War, the Kurds were ultimately not given a state, an outcome that continues to inspire the Syrian Kurds' pursuit of national independence to this day.⁴ Following the Treaty of Lausanne, all US interactions with the Kurds would necessarily be premised on the Kurds' lack of a state.

The initial section of the first chapter will consider the interwar treatment of the Syrian Kurdish minority by France, holder of the League of Nations Mandate for Syria, including a discussion of the issues surrounding the porous Turkish-Syrian border and the segregation of Kurdish communities that had been enforced by the Turkish and Syrian governments.⁵ Although this section has limited direct connection to US foreign policy, due to the US's relative lack of

⁴ Ali, Othman, "The Kurds and the Lausanne Peace Negotiations, 1922-23," *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 3 (1997): 521. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283891>.

⁵ White, Benjamin Thomas, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 117.

involvement in Syria during the interwar period, it is included to show the different experiences of the Kurdish populations in Syria and Turkey. These differences influenced the way in which the US subsequently dealt with respective Kurdish groups, due to the lasting effect that Syria's and Turkey's interwar era Kurdish policies had on subsequent geopolitical alliances throughout the Cold War.

The second section within Chapter One will continue chronologically, with events occurring during the early to mid Cold War era from approximately 1945 to the late 1960s. This section will consider potential reasons the US did not attempt to support the Kurds in Syria or Turkey. It will consider how US policies changed, from initiating coups in conjunction with the Syrian Army against the Syrian government in 1956-57, to favouring stability and the retention of the status quo within Syria, due to the US's burgeoning post-1967 alliance with Israel and its consequent interest in brokering a peace deal between Syria and Israel.⁶ Neither initiating coups, nor its alliance with Israel, put the US in a position to support the Syrian Kurds in a partnership against the Syrian government.

The US's strategy during the Cold War was characterized by its ambition to contain the spread of communism and Soviet influence. Therefore, in 1952 when Turkey was accepted to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which rendered the state a US-backed bulwark against the Soviet Union, it was not to the US's advantage to support the Turkish Kurds and destabilize the Ankara government. If the US had supported the Turkish Kurds its policy would

⁶ Gorst, Anthony and W. Scott Lucas, "The other collusion: Operation straggle and Anglo-American intervention in Syria, 1955-56," *Intelligence and National Security* 4, no.3 (1989): 577. doi: 10.1080/02684528908432017; Blackwell, Stephen, "Britain, the United States and the Syrian Crisis, 1957," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 11, no.3 (2000):145. doi: 10.1080/09592290008406174; Cleveland, William, Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*. Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2016, 337.

have adversely affected the US's objective of containing communism, a policy that is illustrative of the tension between realpolitik and idealistic practices within one overarching policy position.⁷ Thus, the solidification of Cold War alliances, combined with the weakened condition of the Kurdish communities as a result of French and Turkish interwar policies, culminated in the US's having no interest in supporting either the Syrian or Turkish Kurds' confrontation with their respective governing states.

The third section will describe the US's support for the Iraqi Kurds in their efforts to destabilize the pro-communist regime in Baghdad throughout the 1970s, and the US's involvement in the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran War. It will begin by discussing the insights gained from the 1976 Pike Papers, leaked Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents that expose Henry Kissinger, during the time when he served as President Gerald Ford's Secretary of State, deserting the Iraqi Kurds after the US had promised to support their 1970s bid to destabilize the Iraqi government.⁸ 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 best interest.⁹ Although these documents do not directly discuss US policies toward the Syrian or Turkish Kurds, the papers are one of the clearest examples of the US's realpolitik orientation toward the Kurds. Moreover, the US had a multitude of reasons why it did not support the Syrian or Turkish Kurds during the 1970-80s. By the 1970s the US had solidified its alliance with Israel, and although Israel and Syria were in a stalemate over Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights since

⁷ Sanjian, Ara, "The Formulation of the Baghdad Pact," *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 2 (1997): 228. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283868>.

⁸ U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, "The Pike papers," *The Village Voice*, February 16, 1976. <https://archive.org/details/Village-Voice-Pike-Report-CIA>.

⁹ Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Renewal*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 596.

the 1967 June War, the US and Israel believed that they could negotiate with the regime of Hafez al-Assad.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ During the Crisis, the US secretly agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba.¹² Additionally, the incorporation of Marxist ideology in the 1980s by the most prominent Kurdish opposition group, the Kurdistan Workers Party's (PKK), added to the US's disinterest in supporting the PKK's bid to destabilize the government in Ankara.¹³

The fourth section of the first chapter will investigate the extent to which the US's temporary support for the Iraqi Kurds' establishment of an autonomous area following the US-led coalition's defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War also influenced the Turkish Kurds.¹⁴ The Turkish Kurds were inspired by the Iraqi Kurds' ability to gain an autonomous area, and began to put increased pressure on the Turkish government to listen to their own concerns.¹⁵ However, the PKK's methods of resistance against the Turkish government, namely targeted attacks against civilians and military personnel, placed them on both Turkey's and the US's lists of

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 355.

¹¹ Karpat, Kemal, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in Transition 1950-1974*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³ White, Paul, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, London: Zed Books, 2015, 126.

¹⁴ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2017, 158.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

terrorist organizations.¹⁶ Due to the international outcry in 1992 after the Turkish Army fired on unarmed Kurdish protestors, the US government quietly requested that Turkey change its policies to improve the treatment of the Kurdish minority within its borders.¹⁷ However, the idealism and apparent concern for the Kurds' treatment is only superficially present in US policy, as the US only employed rhetoric to condemn Turkey's actions without enforcing its apparent stance with economic or military actions. The US could not pursue an entirely idealistic policy toward the Turkish Kurds, as such a policy would be in opposition to the US's perceived interest of retaining Turkey as a NATO ally.

Throughout the 1990s, the US did not request of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's regime the same imperative, to improve the treatment of the Kurds, that the US asked of the Ankara government. It is possible that the US's inaction was a result of Syria's internal policies that supported the Kurds in Turkey from the 1980s until 2000 in an effort to destabilize the Turkish government, support that the Syrian Kurds did not wish to jeopardize by requesting greater rights for themselves within Syria.¹⁸ As a result, the poor treatment of the Syrian Kurds by the Syrian government was not obvious to the US, giving the US no reason to pressure the Syrian government to improve its treatment of the Syrian Kurds. Additionally, in the late 1990s, the US was facilitating talks between the Syrian and Israeli governments. Therefore, it was in the

¹⁶ White, Paul, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, 42-43; Lockhart, Joe, "Press Briefing by Joe Lockhart," *National Archives*, November 13, 1998. Accessed October 25, 2018. <https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1998/11/1998-11-13-press-briefing-by-joe-lockhart.html>.

¹⁷ Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994, 44.

¹⁸ Paasche, Till, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation," *Middle East Policy* 12, no 1. (2015): 79. Doi: 10.1111/mepo.12114; Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009, Para 30.

US's best interest to ensure stability in Syria so as not to jeopardize the possibility of a peace deal between the two states.¹⁹

The fifth and final section of this chapter will discuss the PKK's continued hostility toward the Turkish government throughout the 2000s, and moderate attempts by the US to urge Turkey to better treat its Kurdish minority.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 2004.²² As for Syria, upon Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, power was passed down to his son Bashar al-Assad, opening up a period of political ferment known as the "Damascus Spring."²³ People within Syria anticipated that Bashar al-Assad would usher in reform and improve the lives of his population.²⁴ 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

¹⁹ Daoudy, Marwa, "A Missed Chance for Peace," 221-227.

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

²¹ Baurder, Joerg, "The Domestic Effects of Turkey's EU Accession Negotiations: A Missed Opportunity for Europe?" In *Turkey and the European Union: Facing new challenges and opportunities*, eds. Cengiz, Firat, and Lars Hoffmann, 184, New York: Routledge, 2014.

²² White, Paul, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, xiv.

²³ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, Milton Park: Routledge, 2011, 231.

²⁴ Haas, Mark and David Lesch, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, Colorado: Westview Press, 2015, 79.

under his father, due to Bashar al-Assad's inability to correct Syria's internal problems.²⁵ 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 the US's best interest to destabilize Syria.²⁶

The second chapter will consider how the US's 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 changed since the interwar period, the US's policy has not, making it unsurprising that the US wanted to withdraw its military support from the Syrian Kurds' cause in 2018.

The advent of the 2011 Arab Spring, and the Syrian Civil War that followed, appeared on the surface to have altered the US's realpolitik orientation toward the Syrian Kurds. In the aftermath of the popular uprising within Syria in 2011, the Obama administration used idealistic rhetoric to support the Syrian population in their request for Bashar al-Assad to peacefully step down.²⁷ However, the US did not significantly increase its support for the Syrian Kurds until ISIS crossed the Syria-Iraq border in 2014, and even then the US provided the Kurdish rebels with minimal financial and military aid.²⁸ Clearly, the US's rhetoric highlights its idealistic motivations to help the Syrian population and support the fight against terrorism; however, the minimal resources allocated to the Syrian Kurds indicates that the US had an underlying self-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁶ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 232.

²⁷ McGreal, Chris and Martin Chulov, "Syria: Assad must resign, says Obama," *Guardian*, August 19, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/18/syria-assad-must-resign-obama>.

²⁸ Cook, Steven< "The Syrian War is Over, and America Lost," *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2018, para 4. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/23/the-syrian-war-is-over-and-america-lost/>.

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 ISIS's 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.²⁹ Initially, President Trump claimed that he would withdraw the military without guaranteeing the safety of the US's Kurdish allies from the Turkish government, who had threatened to drive the Kurds out of territory close to the Syrian-Turkish border due to Turkey's fear of its own Kurdish opponents being harboured in Syria.³⁰ This policy was consistent with the US's historically underlying realpolitik orientation, in which the US has supported Kurdish groups, only to disregard them when the Kurds' actions no longer directly benefit US foreign policy. However, in early January 2019, under significant pressure from elements within President Trump's government, President Trump changed his policy, claiming that the US would place economic sanctions on Turkey unless it received assurances that Turkey would not strike Kurdish forces allied with the US.³¹ It remains to be seen if the US will break from its realpolitik orientation and choose to protect the Syrian Kurds. In the light of the Trump administration's claim that ISIS has been defeated in Syria, it is questionable whether support for the Syria Kurds still serves the US's geostrategic interests. Accordingly, any decision by the US to continue supporting the Syrian Kurd's nationalist

²⁹ El-Gamal, Jasmine, "Trump is making the same mistakes in Syria that Obama did in the Middle East".

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "Trump threatens to 'devastate' Turkish economy over Syrian Kurds," *BBC News*, January 14, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46859164>.

aspirations while simultaneously risking further harm to the US's relationship with Turkey might reveal the amount of idealism in the US's stance 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 Democratic as well as Republican presidential administrations. However, US foreign policy toward the Kurds prior to 1921 was not always viewed through a realpolitik orientation. Woodrow Wilson, US President from 1913-21, gravitated toward an idealistic orientation rather than a realist stance. President Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' address to the US Congress in January 1918 is generally viewed as encapsulating his idealistic vision of US foreign policy, which he hoped would guide the peace process at the end of World War One.³² In Point Five, Wilson proposed that Western colonizers consider the interests of the populations within the Middle East, rather than merely their own, when dividing up territory.³³ Many Kurds residing in territory that was under Ottoman rule understood Point Five as articulating a US promise that colonized peoples would be given self-determination at the end of the war. Although Wilson never specifically promised the Kurds anything, in 1919 there was a degree of political will within the

³² MacMillan, Margaret, *Paris 1919*, New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003, 13.

³³ Wilson, Woodrow. "Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points", in *Paris 1919*, ed. Margaret MacMillan, 495-6, New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003.

US to help Ottoman subjects gain independence within lands where they lived, rather than allow empires such as Britain and France to come into control of the territory.³⁴ US support for self-determination was reinforced by the results of the King-Crane Commission that was authorized by the US government in 1919 to make recommendations to the allies about the appropriate divisions of Greater Syria between Arabs and Zionists after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire.³⁵ The Commission's recommendation for a Kurdish state argued that Kurdistan was the only state that could be "handled separately at present."³⁶ Although the Commission's results were not taken into account when the final borders were drawn because Britain and France had assiduously dismissed, the Commission's recommendations, released in 1922, reinforced the US's support for the Kurds' self-determination and the perception that areas within the Middle East should not be subsumed into the empires of European nations.³⁷ Support existed in the US for self-determination, as Wilson represented a "deep rooted American liberal hatred of all forms of imperialism" that was underscored by a belief that World War One had been caused by European imperialism.³⁸ US citizens wanted to prevent European empires from expanding at the end of the war in an effort to prevent another war from occurring.³⁹ Despite the lack of implementation of many of Wilson's points, partially due to his 1919 illness preventing him from advocating for the points' consideration, together with the exclusion of the Commission's

³⁴ Fieldhouse, D.K, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 60.

³⁵ "1919: The King-Crane Commission Report."
<http://www.atour.com/government/un/20040205g.html> (accessed February 2, 2019).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ MacMillan, Margaret. *Paris 1919*, 406.

³⁸ Fieldhouse, D.K, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958*, 60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

recommendations due to British and French disinterest, Wilson's idealism remains clearly present within both documents. Wilson's idealism is sporadically discernible throughout subsequent US foreign policy toward the Kurds; however, after Wilson's term ended, US policies toward the Kurds displayed idealism only on the surface. Ultimately all future US policies toward the Kurds would exhibit a realpolitik orientation wherever US interests were at stake. Nevertheless, Wilson's idealism is the foil against which this thesis will measure other administrations' realpolitik-oriented policies.

If President Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' address in 1918 sparked the Kurds' hopes for an international patron to support their bid for a state, then their hopes were only heightened in 1920 with the Treaty of Sevres that ended the Allies' war against the Ottomans. In the Treaty of Sevres, a prospective state of Kurdistan was traced onto the new map of the Middle East, owing above all to British support. Britain was initially in favour of an independent Kurdistan, which London hoped would act as a counterweight to the growing strength of the provisional government in Ankara.⁴⁰ However, the treaty was never implemented because it was immediately violated by the provisional Ankara government, who contested the borders of Southwest Anatolia which had been allotted to Greece by the Treaty of Sevres. The 1919-1922 Greco-Turkish War, partially fought over the contested areas, ended with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which redrew the borders agreed upon in the Treaty of Sevres.⁴¹ Simultaneously, Britain became wary of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) growing global influence, causing London to withdraw its support for a Kurdish state ahead of the Treaty of

⁴⁰ Ali, Othman, "The Kurds and the Lausanne Peace Negotiations, 1922-23", 521.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Lausanne.⁴² 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 curbing the USSR's influence over the country.⁴³ The British retraction of support and the differing interpretations of Wilson's '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 Britain's and France's policies in particular, the Kurdish populations were split up into the states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

At first glance, it appears that the loss of a potential state in 1923 was a considerable setback to the Kurds' nationalist aspirations. However, from a deeper analysis of the Kurds' relationship with the victors of the First World War, it becomes clear that the Kurds were still treated, throughout the early interwar period, as though they were a strong and distinctive ethnic group that could benefit France and the provisional Ankara government if given autonomy.⁴⁴ Therefore, the Kurds' hopes were not dashed with the Treaty of Lausanne, but continued into the early interwar period. Thus, the Kurds attained a brief window of opportunity to gain autonomy. This is illustrated by both the rulers of the French mandate of Syria, and the provisional Ankara government, having momentarily considering creating an autonomous if not independent Kurdish sector within their new states prior to 1925.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 523.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 524.

⁴⁴ Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 40; White, Benjamin Thomas. *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*, 112.

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 France's imperial divide and rule policies.⁴⁵ During the early 1920s, the French employed Kurds, who had traditionally lived on the borderlands between Turkey and Syria, to guard the border.⁴⁶ In reality, this policy ensured that for the first half of the 1920s the Syrian-Turkish border remained relatively open, as Kurdish communities living on either side stayed as connected as they had been before the political borders were drawn.⁴⁷ In 1925 the French even considered creating an autonomous Kurdish area in the north, to cement their divide and rule policies by encouraging resentment between the Kurds and the Arabs to ensure that they would never join together to confront the French rulers.⁴⁸ However, the French approach rapidly changed after the Turkish government urged them to restrict the Syrian Kurds' freedom following multiple Kurdish rebellions in Turkey that the government in Ankara had sought to suppress. The Turkish government wanted to prevent the creation of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish area on their southern border, because they feared it could stoke Turkish Kurds' nationalist sentiments and threaten Turkish unity.⁴⁹ In the mid-1920s, the French were still recovering from the First World

⁴⁵ White, Benjamin Thomas. *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*, 118.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

War and were in no position to anger Turkey, a country that both the French and the British relied on to counteract Soviet aims in the Middle East. As a result, the French adhered to Turkey's request for reducing the autonomy of the Kurds, forcing France to invent a new way to implement its divide and rule policies within the Kurdish areas.⁵⁰ A solution presented itself soon after France abandoned its consideration of Kurdish autonomy, when the Turkish government expelled into Syria a large proportion of their Kurdish population that had been active in the 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion.⁵¹ The French were glad to accept the Turkish Kurds, as they believed they could divide the Kurdish population between Syrian Kurds and the incoming Turkish Kurds by controlling the newcomers' citizenship on which government employment was predicated.⁵² Between 1925 and 1927 the Great Syrian Revolt took over the country, setting the French in opposition against the general population who had the unified aim of removing the French from the Mandate of Syria.⁵³ French records from the Great Syrian Revolt claim that the Kurds fought for both the rebels and the French.⁵⁴ This division shows that the new divide and rule policies implemented by the French thrust forward the segregation of the Kurdish population within Syria; however, it should also be recognized that the underlying tribal divisions within the Syrian Kurdish population could have partially been responsible for the success of the French divide and rule policy.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵¹ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 28.

⁵² White, Benjamin Thomas. *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*, 112-13; 118.

⁵³ Abboud, Samer N. *Syria*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, 24.

⁵⁴ White, Benjamin, "The Kurds of Damascus in the 1930s: Development of a Politics of Ethnicity," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 6 (2010): 906. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27920327>.

The Turkish Kurds' interwar conditions were different from the Syrian Kurds' experience. Unlike the Syrian Kurds, the Turkish Kurds were not ruled by a European imperialist power; instead, they were governed by the provisional Ottoman government in Ankara until the new state of Turkey was created in 1923. Initially, the Kurds living in what would become Turkey were well treated by the government, which recognized them as a distinct ethnic group, allowing them to speak their language and practice their culture.⁵⁵ Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), who would be elected as the first Turkish President in 1923, acknowledged in a speech to the provisional government in 1920 that the Kurds and Arabs were different ethnic groups, historically speaking.⁵⁶ However, like most Turks, the majority of the Kurds professed a belief in Islam, and he believed that this, together with patriotism to Turkey would unite them as one people within the new nation; theoretically, this would remove the need for the legal protection of minorities within Turkey. Until the 1922 end of the Greco-Turkish War, the provisional government even considered giving the Kurds autonomy within Turkish territory.⁵⁷ However, in the mid-1920s, two events changed the direction of Kurdish treatment within Turkey: the election of Atatürk to President and the Sheikh Said Rebellion. These two events would have repercussions for the Turkish Kurds throughout the next century. Atatürk, the military general who led Turkey to victory in the Greco-Turkish War, established Kemalism, a policy that is nominally still practiced in Turkey today; however, the policy is slowly being eroded by the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian imposition of Islamically

⁵⁵ Heper, Metin, *The State and the Kurds in Turkey*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. Doi: 10.1057/9780230593602, 120.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 40.

tinged forms of Turkish national identity.⁵⁸ Kemalism was created to mould Turkish nationalism and form a unified Turkish society that valued “reformism, republicanism, secularism, nationalism, popularism and etatism”, and was oriented toward the West; however, the policy became an excuse for future governments not to respect Kurdish ethnic identity.⁵⁹ The second event that altered the future of the Turkish Kurds was the 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion, led by a Kurd in protest of Kemalist policies.⁶⁰ The Turkish government believed that the rebellion was a direct threat to the country’s unity, leading Atatürk to expel rebellious Kurds from the country and into Syria.⁶¹ As a result of Kemalism and the rebellion, the Kurds were forcibly assimilated into Turkish culture and systematically oppressed by the government, ostensibly to protect Turkish unity.

The third significant state actor in this narrative is the US. Between 1917 and 1927 Turkey cut off all diplomatic relations with the US.⁶² Anti-Turkish sentiments in the US grew after diplomatic ties were severed, creating space for stereotypes such as the terrible Turk devised by missionary literature pointing to the Turks as the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide which began in 1915.⁶³ This literature provoked segments of the American population

⁵⁸ Cleveland, William, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 170.

⁵⁹ Yilmaz, Şuhnaz, “Challenging the stereotypes: Turkish–American relations in the inter-war era,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (2006): 225. Doi: 10.1080/00263200500417520; Cleveland, William, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 170-71.

⁶⁰ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 94.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶² Yilmaz, Şuhnaz, “Challenging the stereotypes: Turkish–American relations in the inter-war era”, 223.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 227.

into believing that the Turk was cruel and could not be trusted.⁶⁴ 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's 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 Wilson's exit from office in 1921, 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.⁶⁵ The rationale for US disengagement from the Syrian Kurdish struggle for independence is understandable through the US's *realpolitik* orientation, as France controlled the Syrian Mandate and the US was in no position to oppose the French due to the US's isolationist 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's interwar administrations also did not explicitly support the expansion of European empires, which contributed to the US's interwar policies appearing as though in tension between *realpolitik* and 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

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *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.⁶⁶ 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 France's ability to devote resources to the Syrian Mandate.⁶⁷ 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

⁶⁶ 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. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/1290698788?accountid=14846>.

⁶⁷ Fieldhouse, D.K, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958*, 327.

every corner of the globe.⁶⁸ The newly independent Syrian state viewed the US as a substitute for the imperial French; therefore, Syria was quickly inducted into the Soviet camp, an alliance that has implications for the Syrian Kurds to this day. By 1947, the US espoused the policy of containment, in which rather than attempting to defeat the USSR directly, the US tried to contain the spread of communism and Soviet influence.⁶⁹ However, the US also actively attempted to persuade countries to join its side. The US had been trying to coax Syria into the Western camp since the late 1940s; however, when persuasion and a measure of coercion, such as the 1949 CIA engineered coup, failed, Syria became the focus of US covert plans called Operation Straggle in 1956 and Operation Wappen in 1957 to overthrow the Syrian government and install a new regime that was sympathetic to the US.⁷⁰ These covert missions relied on the officer corps of the Syrian army to overthrow the Syrian government; nonetheless, both attempts failed.⁷¹ However, it is not necessarily the missions themselves that are of most interest, but rather, the people whom the US chose to carry them out. Thirty years before the initiation of the coup, the Syrian Kurds had been a powerful group that the French considered important and useful enough to contemplate granting an autonomous region in Syria.⁷² However, by 1956, some within the CIA did not even consider the Syrian Kurds to be worth utilizing in an attempted coup against the

⁶⁸ Historians do not agree on the exact date that signalled the beginning of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union; however, this thesis will work with Odd Arne Westad's start date of 1945. Westad, Odd Arne, *The Global Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 3.

⁶⁹ Westad, Odd Arne, *The Global Cold War*, 27.

⁷⁰ Gorst, Anthony and W. Scott Lucas, "The other collusion: Operation Straggle and Anglo-American intervention in Syria, 1955–56," 577; Blackwell, Stephen, "Britain, the United States and the Syrian Crisis, 1957," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 11, no. 3 (2000):145. doi: 10.1080/09592290008406174.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² White, Benjamin Thomas. *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*, 112.

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's consistently overlooking the Syrian Kurds during this period. However, the CIA's analysis of the situation was significantly over-simplified.

Prior to 1963 when the Ba'athist 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 a vested interest in sustaining the current system and might not have been receptive to supporting a coup even if the CIA had approached them.⁷³ The situation is further complicated by the political turmoil and multiple government collapses that occurred since Syrian independence in 1946.⁷⁴ Amid all this chaos, it is unsurprising that the CIA chose the most obvious ally in the Syrian Army. Although, the CIA's lack of understanding of the internal situation in Syria produced a misrepresentation of events that was partially responsible for the US's overlooking the Syrian Kurds throughout the early Cold War.

As the Cold War unfolded, another international actor emerged that contributed to the US-Syrian relationship changing from hostility to compromise. The Israeli initiation of the June War in 1967 introduced a different dynamic into the diplomatic relations between the US and Syria; this, due to Israel's resulting occupation of the Golan Heights. The US was forced to shift its policies from attempting to overthrow the Syrian government in the 1950s, to trying to keep the region as stable as possible to protect its new ally Israel. Israel had been drawn into the US's

⁷³ White, Benjamin, "The Kurds of Damascus in the 1930s: Development of a Politics of Ethnicity," 912; Schmidinger, Thomas, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of the Syrian Kurds*, London: University Press, 2018, 48-52.

⁷⁴ Abboud, Samer N, *Syria*, 26-27.

strategic camp because the US needed another ally in the Middle East to counteract the spread of communism, after the Soviet Union increased its arms sales to Arab states that had become concerned for their safety after Israel's offensive in the June War.⁷⁵ Although Syria officially cut off diplomatic relations with the US after the June War, Henry Kissinger, while he was the US's National Security Adviser under President Richard Nixon, was responsible for the shuttle diplomacy that formed the bedrock of the agreement of disengagement between Syria and Israel in May 1974.⁷⁶ Kissinger only succeeded in brokering a cease-fire between the two sides after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, because of the relative stability that had taken hold of Syria after the ascent of Hafez al-Assad to President in 1970. The US's interest in solidifying its alliance with Israel and promoting regional stability ensured that it would not pressure the Syrian government over their treatment of the Syrian Kurds. The US chose to pursue a policy in line with its realpolitik orientation even in light of the 120,000 Syrian Kurds who had lost their citizenship rights in 1962 due to the Syrian government's assertion that they had settled illegally in the country during the preceding decades.⁷⁷

In comparison to Syria, Turkey had a relatively smooth political transition from the interwar period into the early Cold War era. Turkey was never ruled by a European imperial power, which allowed it to strengthen state infrastructure in the interwar era. Turkey remained relatively stable throughout the early Cold War period, with the help of the Turkish Army; the army took it upon itself to hold political rulers to the secular standards enshrined in the policies

⁷⁵ Cleveland, William, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 337.

⁷⁶ Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Renewal*, 355.

⁷⁷ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 297.

of Kemalism set out during Atatürk's era.⁷⁸ 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 alliance it had been cultivating with the US since 1927.⁷⁹

Since the end of the First World War, Turkey had been an unofficial bulwark against the USSR, first for the British and then the US. In 1952, Turkey joined NATO, officially inducting the country into the Western camp. Turkey's acceptance into NATO began a string of treaties that Turkey signed, increasing its connection to the US.⁸⁰ Turkey joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955—after lengthy discussions with Britain and the US—affirming its commitment to containing the spread of communism.⁸¹ In the 1950s Turkey was concerned that the USSR had armed the Turkish Kurds against the government in Ankara in an attempt to undermine the West's containment policy; a concern that contributed to Turkey's decision to join the Baghdad Pact.⁸² By the 1950s, Kurdish organizations had begun to gravitate toward the USSR as Kurdish political parties remained illegal in Turkey, leaving the Kurds without an avenue of legal,

⁷⁸ Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 15.

⁷⁹ Yilmaz, Şuhnaz, "Challenging the stereotypes: Turkish–American relations in the inter-war era", 223.

⁸⁰ Sanjian, Ara, "The Formulation of the Baghdad Pact", 228; Erickson, Edward, "Turkey as regional hegemon—2014: strategic implications for the United States," *Turkish Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004): 25. doi: 10.1080/1468384042000270317.

⁸¹ Sanjian, Ara, "The Formulation of the Baghdad Pact", 243, 229.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 245.

political expression.⁸³ Although I have not found any evidence suggesting that the USSR successfully armed the Kurds in the 1950s, Turkish fears were not unwarranted; there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the USSR did ultimately arm the Turkish Kurds in the 1980s.⁸⁴ Due to the fear of communist influence, and the burgeoning alliance between the US and Turkey, the US had no underlying self-interested motivation to support the Turkish Kurds in a confrontation with the government in Ankara, or to request the improvement of the Kurds' treatment; thus, resulting policies adhered to the US's underlying realpolitik orientation rather than pursuing an alliance with the Turkish Kurds based on idealism.

To further solidify the US-Turkey alliance, the US offered a gesture of confidence to Turkey by opening a nuclear missile base in the country in 1959.⁸⁵ However, the missiles were removed after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, in which President John F. Kennedy's negotiations with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev resulted in President Kennedy's agreeing to remove the missiles based in Turkey in exchange for the removal of the USSR's missiles from Cuba.⁸⁶ The Cuban Missile Crisis became one example of the increasing geopolitical significance of the US-Turkey alliance on the heels of the 1950s, the decade that Kemal Karpat coined the "testing ground for the US-Turkey alliance".⁸⁷

⁸³ Gunter, Michael M, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 42, no. 3 (1988): 393. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4327776>.

⁸⁴ White, Paul, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, 126.

⁸⁵ Karpat, Kemal, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in Transition*, 55.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

Chapter 1.3 Alliances solidify

If the forging of alliances characterized the early Cold War era, then the 1970s to 80s represented the era of alliance solidification. This period consisted in part of proxy wars fought around the globe in the ongoing confrontation between the US and USSR.⁸⁸ In countries where conflict was not already fomenting, the US or USSR would exploit existing tensions in an attempt to weaken their rival's stronghold in the relevant region. One such situation was engineered in Turkey in the early 1980s by the USSR, with the help of its ally Syria. The USSR knew that the Turkish Kurds had an uneasy relationship with the Turkish government; hoping to exploit this relationship, the USSR channelled weapons through Syria to support the Turkish Kurds in their uprising against the government.⁸⁹ In the early 1980s, segments of the Kurdish population in Turkey joined the PKK, which by 1984 had begun an armed insurgency against the Turkish government that has intermittently continued to the present day. The Syrian government offered to train the PKK within Syria and then send them back over the Turkish border with Russian weapons in an attempt to destabilize Turkey, a country that remained one of the US's most valued allies in the Middle East.⁹⁰ During this period, the PKK was heavily influenced by Marxist ideology and was easily persuaded to help the USSR attempt to overthrow the Turkish government while also advancing the PKK's pro-Kurdish agenda.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Proxy wars began in the 1960s; however, in this instance I am only referring to those fought during the 1970s-80s.

⁸⁹ Gunter, Michael M, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey", 401.

⁹⁰ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 149.

⁹¹ White, Paul, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountains*, 126.

The USSR's and Syria's willingness to support the Turkish Kurds in the early 1980s indicates that the PKK had purportedly become powerful enough to pose a serious challenge to the Turkish government. Additionally, the Syrian government continued to view the Turkish Kurds as a threat to stability within Syria, as they feared that a powerful Turkish Kurdish group could stir up anti-government sentiments within the Syrian Kurdish population. However, in an attempt to avoid these sentiments, the Syrian government encouraged the PKK to incorporate Syrian Kurds into their movement against the Turkish government; this, in an attempt to keep Damascus out of the Syrian Kurds' crosshairs.⁹² The Syrian government further reduced its vulnerability to the Syrian Kurds by threatening to withdraw its support for the Turkish Kurds unless their own Kurdish population kept quiet about the repression they faced.⁹³ These policies were combined with a resettlement scheme that resulted in the forced movement of Syrian Arabs into the Kurdish majority areas to disperse the Kurdish population, and reduce the potential danger to the Damascus government.⁹⁴ It is feasible that the invisible nature of the Syrian Kurds' oppression, along with the US's residual interest in retaining stability within the region to protect Israel, would not have stimulated any US action to promote better treatment of the Syrian Kurds.

From the situation presented above, it appears that the period between the 1970s and 80s resulted in the Syrian government's silencing the Syrian Kurds while the Turkish Kurds were in an armed struggle against a country allied with the US, placing neither group in a position to gain US support. Although the US did not directly support the Syrian or Turkish Kurds during this

⁹² Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 149.

⁹³ Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*, Para 30.

⁹⁴ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 146.

period, its policies concerning the Iraqi Kurds did indirectly influence the Turkish Kurds and provide one of the clearest examples of the US's realpolitik stance toward the Kurds.

Throughout the early 1970s, the US had supported the Iraqi Kurds in their struggle against the Ba'athist government in Baghdad. However, when it became clear that the Iraqi Kurds' resistance was collapsing, the US withdrew support.⁹⁵ The situation was made public in 1976 by the Pike Papers CIA leak that was published in the *Village Voice*.⁹⁶ The documents do not positively portray Henry Kissinger, at the point when he served as President Gerald Ford's 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.⁹⁷ 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 Wilson's presidency. 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.⁹⁸ However, unlike in Wilson's era, the US's policy toward the Kurds was explicitly realist. In this instance, there are strands of idealistic thinking such as Kissinger admitting that he felt bad for the US's actions; however, even if people within the Ford administration had wished the outcome to be different, the US's

⁹⁵ Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Renewal*, 596.

⁹⁶ U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, "The Pike papers".

⁹⁷ Kissinger, Henry, *Years of Renewal*, 596.

⁹⁸ Nehme, Michel and Lokman Meho. "Pawns in a Deadly Game: Iraqi Kurds and the United States, 1972-1975," *International studies* 32, no. 1 (1995): 42. <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/doi/pdf/10.1177/0020881795032001003>.

self-interest prevailed when creating policy. The US's 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.⁹⁹ 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's ending in a decisive victory for either the Iranians or the Iraqis; thus, it was in the US's perceived best interest to retain the status quo between the two states.¹⁰⁰ 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's actions in the Iraq-Iran War. Throughout the Iraq-Iran War, the PKK was given refuge and training by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the US's Kurdish ally in northern Iraq, which bolstered the PKK's efforts against the Turkish government. In the early 1980s, the PKK was primarily using

⁹⁹ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

non-violent means of resistance against the Turkish government; however, following the influence of the KDP, the PKK began to resort to violence.¹⁰¹ During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq and Turkey made a deal allowing either government to deploy forces into the other's country in pursuit of either the KDP or the PKK.¹⁰² This policy resulted in a large depletion of both the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish fighting forces, as well as a splintering of the KDP. During this period, the US remained in opposition to the PKK, supplying Turkey with half the weapons that the government used in its fight against the group throughout the 1980s.¹⁰³ In sum, the US had recalculated its self-interest, choosing its continued alliance with Turkey over its need to strengthen the KDP to balance out the combatants in the Iran-Iraq War.

Chapter 1.4 Hegemony and its influence on the US

The collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War in 1990 altered the US's underlying realpolitik calculations, from primarily focusing on the containment of the USSR, to focusing on international trade relations and the extension of the US's power as the world's preeminent geopolitical hegemon. In 1991, the US undertook the Gulf War to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. The significance of this conflict for the US's relationship with the Kurds in the Middle East hinges on the no-fly zone that the US imposed over the northern Kurdish areas of Iraq, after the Iraqi Kurds had become Saddam Hussein's targets; this, due to the Kurds' uprising against the regime after the Iraqi army had been defeated in Kuwait.¹⁰⁴ US policies in Iraq also benefited

¹⁰¹ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 145.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*; Gunter, Michael M, "The Kurdish Problem in Turkey", 396.

¹⁰³ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 146.

¹⁰⁴ Cleveland, William, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 463.

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.¹⁰⁵ The PKK was inspired by the Iraqi Kurds' semi-autonomous area that developed after the implementation of the no-fly zone, thereby reinvigorating the PKK's 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 Turkey's cross border incursions but was unable to physically stop Turkey in case it refused to allow NATO to retain its base of operations in the country.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

Turkey's willingness to permit the US-led NATO coalition to protect the Iraqi Kurds from NATO's base in Turkey illustrates the continued, strong US-Turkey alliance. Turkey's policy is even more noteworthy when considering that the Turkish government perceived NATO's policy as a direct threat to the country. Turkey's 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.

¹⁰⁵ Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 44.

¹⁰⁶ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 159.

¹⁰⁷ 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 placed on the US's, EU's, and Turkey's list of terrorist organizations.¹⁰⁸ However, with the end of the Cold War, the international community had become more attentive to human rights issues. On March 21, 1992, the Turkish Army fired on Kurdish protestors, sparking international outrage at the event, and the preceding brutal repression and 'death squads' that had been created by the Turkish government to hunt down dissenting members of the Kurdish population.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ However, the US's rhetorically rooted in idealism was only present on the surface of US policy, and was never backed up with the threat of economic sanctions or military action. The EU, on the other hand, had more leverage with Turkey, as it could withhold entry to the EU (Turkey having become a candidate country in 1996) unless Turkey improved its human rights record with its Kurdish minority.¹¹¹ However, Turkey's reception toward the US's and the EU's demands was resoundingly negative, as it bitterly resented what Ankara considered to be ill-intentioned hints to improve the treatment of the Turkish Kurds.¹¹² Nevertheless, after Turkey became an EU

¹⁰⁸ Lockhart, Joe, "Press Briefing by Joe Lockhart", National Archives, November 13, 1998; Olson, Robert, ed, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996, 126.

¹⁰⁹ Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 44.

¹¹⁰ Lockhart, Joe, "Press Briefing by Joe Lockhart", National Archives, February 16, 1999.

¹¹¹ Olson, Robert, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*, 127-8.

¹¹² Erickson, Edward, "Turkey as regional hegemon—2014: strategic implications for the United States", 28; Mango, Andrew, *Turkey: The Challenge of a New Role*, 51.

candidate country, the government did grant the Turkish Kurds more freedom within the state.¹¹³ The tentative relaxation by the government would continue during ceasefires with the PKK, intermittently until the initiation of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and the most recent round of hostilities.

During the 1990s, Syria became characterized by a reorientation toward the West. Syria was no longer supported by the now-defunct USSR, forcing the state to open up its borders to new trading partners. This period saw the US dramatically improve its trade and diplomatic relations with Syria.¹¹⁴ The US even brought Syria back into brief peace talks with Israel.¹¹⁵ Domestically, Hafez al-Assad had become increasingly brutal in the 1980s-90s, repressing all aspects of the Kurdish population's lives. Nonetheless, the pattern that had emerged in the 1980s continued until 2000, whereby the Syrian Kurds informally agreed to stay quiet about their repression in exchange for the Syrian government's continued support for the PKK.¹¹⁶ The Syrian Kurds' silence, combined with the US's interest in ensuring that Syria remained open to peace talks with Israel, prompted the US not to request of the Syrian government the same request that it had made of Turkey for improved treatment of the Kurds. However, US policy toward the Syrian government was not completely consistent, as the US did strongly condemn Syria's policy of harbouring the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and its continued assistance to the PKK's fight against the Turkish government. The external pressure applied on Syria by the US

¹¹³ Olson, Robert, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s*, 127-8.

¹¹⁴ Lawson, Fred, "Domestic Transformation and Foreign Steadfastness in Contemporary Syria," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 1 (1994): 48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328661>.

¹¹⁵ Daoudy, Marwa, "A Missed Chance for Peace", 221-227.

¹¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*, Par 30.

and Turkey forced Damascus to expel Öcalan in 1998.¹¹⁷ The US's inconsistent policies toward the Syrian government are, however, consistent with its underlying realism. It was in the US's perceived best interest to rhetorically pressure Syria in conjunction with Turkey's concerns surrounding its Kurdish population, but it was not in the US's 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 US's continued alliance with the northern Iraqi Kurds, now known as the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), whom the US had cultivated during the 1991 Gulf War. Due to the KRG's connection with the PKK, the Turkish government refused to support the US in its war against Iraq.¹¹⁸ At the time, observers wondered if this spelled the beginning of a rift in the alliance between the US and Turkey.¹¹⁹ Although the two states have continued to be close allies, it is possible that the disagreements between them in 2003 have been partially responsible for the ongoing breakdown in trust between the two governments.

Not only was the US-Turkish relationship tested during the 2000s; the US also changed its stance toward the PKK. Prior to 9/11, the US had considered posing as a mediator between

¹¹⁷ Erickson, Edward, "Turkey as regional hegemon—2014: strategic implications for the United States", 32.

¹¹⁸ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 229.

¹¹⁹ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 241

the PKK and the Turkish government in an attempt to keep the two sides negotiating; however, after 9/11, the US took a harder line against terrorism and no longer encouraged the Turkish government to negotiate with the PKK.¹²⁰ In 2007, the US went so far as to provide the Turkish government GPS coordinates for the location of PKK members in KRG occupied Iraq.¹²¹ During the 1991 Gulf War, the US had been concerned that the Turkish government would break international law by following the PKK over the Turkey-Iraq border in retaliation for attacks against Turkey. In 1991, the US's interest in retaining a base of NATO operations in Turkey led it not to oppose Turkey's actions.¹²² However, twelve years later, the US was willing to condone Turkey's actions, as Ankara invaded KRG occupied territory in search of the PKK.¹²³ Clearly, the US still valued its alliance with Turkey, even given the latter's refusal to join the 2003 US-led coalition in Iraq. Once again, the US had placed its interest in continuing its alliance with Turkey above its alliance with the Iraqi Kurds, or an idealistic aspiration to see Turkey and the PKK reconcile.

Turkey's internal policies toward its Kurdish population also changed during the 2000s, partially due to the US and the EU placing pressure on Ankara to improve the treatment of its Kurdish minority. As a result, in 2001 Turkey began to implement reforms when it lifted the ban on Kurdish language television and radio.¹²⁴ By 2006 Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accelerated the process of lifting restrictions on the Kurdish population and attempted to engage

¹²⁰ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 228.

¹²¹ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 166.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 159.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹²⁴ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 225.

the PKK in multiple rounds of negotiations in what has become known as the Kurdish opening. Erdoğan believed that the solution was to “solve the Kurdish problem with the Kurds” rather than implement repressive policies without any dialogue.¹²⁵ However, Erdoğan was subjected to the same pressures as his predecessors when the army threatened to step in; this was due to his policies toward the Kurdish population that the army believed threatened Kemalism and Turkish unity.¹²⁶ As a result, Erdoğan was forced to moderate his Kurdish policies during future periods of negotiations with the PKK.

The EU was the strongest international defender of Kurdish rights within Turkey throughout the 2000s; the EU had leverage over Turkey, so long as the latter remained determined to become an EU member state. The EU set the minority rights threshold for Turkey’s entry very high, which forced Turkey to improve the conditions of the Kurdish minority rapidly.¹²⁷ However, by the end of the decade, Turkey had refocused away from Europe and back to the Middle East, as it believed it could have a larger influence over the region and was making little progress with its acceptance into the EU: thereby, there was a reduction in the power that the EU held over Turkey to ensure it continued to improve its minority rights standards.¹²⁸ The US was notably quiet during the 2000s on the improvement of Kurdish rights,

¹²⁵ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 224.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Sarokhanian, Nickolas and Yannis Stivachtis, “Fulfilling the Copenhagen Political Criteria: A Comparison between Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania,” In *Turkey-European Union relations: Dilemma, opportunities, and constraints*, eds. Muftuler-Bac, Meltem, and Yannis Stivachtis, 297, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008

¹²⁸ Baurder, Joerg, “The Domestic Effects of Turkey’s EU Accession Negotiations: A Missed Opportunity for Europe, 192; Ülgen, Sinan, “Turkey’s Shifting Foreign Policy: What Next?” *Carnegie Europe*, July 14, 2010. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2010/07/14/turkey-s-shifting-foreign-policy-what-next-pub-41198>.

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

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the US-Syria relationship was shaped around Syria's continued 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, a Shi'i organization that the US considered a terrorist group and a direct threat to Israel.¹²⁹ 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.¹³⁰ Although Syria did eventually concede 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.¹³¹ David Lesch argues that the "United States and the West have it out for [al-Assad]", 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.¹³² Ironically, Israel was unsupportive of the US's policy of pressuring Syria to withdraw from Lebanon; Israel was concerned that Syria might be weakened, which was not in Israel's perceived self-interest.¹³³

¹²⁹ Yildiz, Kerim, *The Kurds in Syria: the forgotten people*, London: Pluto Press, 2005.

¹³⁰ Chomsky, Noam and Gilbert Achcar, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War, and Justice*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007, 133.

¹³¹ David Lesch also argues that the West did not appreciate the complications that al-Assad had to overcome to improve the lives of his citizens, leading to extensive, ill informed criticism by the US of the al-Assad government.
Haas, Mark, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, 90.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Chomsky, Noam, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War, and Justice*, 135.

Syria's domestic policies changed 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.¹³⁴ Directly after he took power, Bashar al-Assad implemented the Damascus Spring doctrine which liberalized many of his father's repressive 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 his father's policies in 2003, because "Syria was still suffering from the same socioeconomic underlying factors" that al-Assad had no recourse to rectify.¹³⁵

In 2004, riots broke out at a football match, sparking the Qamishli uprising, otherwise known as the Kurdish intifada.¹³⁶ The rioters were protesting the US invasion of Iraq, with Sunni Syrians supporting Saddam Hussein while the Kurdish population championed the US cause, due to the US's support for the Iraqi Kurds.¹³⁷ The riots spread across Kurdish areas, sparking government violence against the Kurdish protestors which continued into 2005, when 25,000 Syrian Kurds came out to protest against the government after the death of Kurdish Sufi leader Sheik Mashouq Khasnawi.¹³⁸ The Qamishli uprising was the first time in recent Syrian Kurdish history that the Kurds had mobilized as a unified group against the government. It became a

¹³⁴ Haas, Mark, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, 79.

¹³⁵ Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 231; Haas, Mark, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, 82.

¹³⁶ Gunter, Michael, *The Kurds a Modern History*, 107-8.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

moment of self-realization that they could make the Damascus government listen to their concerns, while also becoming increasingly visible to the international community.¹³⁹ 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.¹⁴⁰ 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.¹⁴¹

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. An example is a 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.¹⁴² However, even though the US rhetorically censured al-Assad after he rescinded the Damascus Spring policy and organized conferences to hear the Syrian Kurds' perspective, the US never directly pressured al-

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 107-8.

¹⁴⁰ Syria Damascus, "Iraqi Kurds Rebuff Syrian Kurdish Activist's Request for Cooperation," *Wikileaks Cable*: 09DAMASCUS114_a. Dated February 8, 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DAMASCUS114_a.html.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Charountaki, Marianna, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, 232.

Assad on the Kurds' behalf.¹⁴³ The US did not pressure Damascus because, like Israel, it was not in the US's perceived self-interest to destabilize Syria.

Chapter Two: The US and the Syrian Civil War

The preceding chapter was dedicated to exploring the balance between realist and idealist trends in US foreign policy toward the Syrian and Turkish Kurds after Woodrow Wilson left office in 1921. The current chapter will attempt to explain how the historic trend in which the US exhibited realist thinking in its policies toward the Kurds, impacted US policy toward the Syrian Kurds throughout the Syrian Civil War. This section will examine two questions: why did the US come to support the Syrian Kurds in their post-2011 fight against the al-Assad regime and ISIS? Additionally, why did the Trump administration announce in December 2018 the withdrawal of troops from Syria? I will also examine the historical reasons why observers should not have been surprised by Trump's decision.

The Syrian Civil War was sparked on February 17, 2011, when a group of school children spray-painted "the people want the downfall of the regime" on their school wall in Da'ra, a slogan that the regime considered revolutionary and dangerous.¹⁴⁴ The regime placed the school children in jail, leading to a town-wide protest against their arrest. Following the protests in Dar'a, country-wide demonstrations against the government began due to the surrounding villages' subjection to government repression, food shortages and a lack of freedom of expression since al-Assad rescinded the Damascus Spring doctrine.¹⁴⁵ The protests became so

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Abboud, Samer N, *Syria*, 62.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

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.¹⁴⁶ 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), the YPG's political wing, declared as an independent state in 2012.¹⁴⁷

The US entered the scenario approximately six months after the protests started. On August 11, 2011, President Barack Obama stated that the US has "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."¹⁴⁸ 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's 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.¹⁴⁹ On August 21, 2013, al-Assad used chemical weapons on the population in Ghouta.¹⁵⁰ The US did nothing.

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

¹⁴⁷ Stevenson, Jonathan, "The Kurds' precarious balancing act in Syria", v.

¹⁴⁸ McGreal, Chris, "Syria: Assad must resign, says Obama".

¹⁴⁹ Nahlawi, Yasmine, "The Responsibility to Protect and Obama's Red Line on Syria", 77.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

Obama's idealistic rhetoric that he had espoused prior to the 2012 election did not enunciate a policy that the US could practically follow through on after al-Assad's Ghouta 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 2011.¹⁵¹ Only two years later, it would not have been in the Obama administration's best interest, partially due to domestic pressure from his joint chiefs of staff, to reengage US troops in another war in the Middle East.¹⁵² An additional element to the US's calculation was 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-Assad's policies since he took office in 2000.¹⁵³ 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

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

¹⁵² 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 Bachmann, "Syria: a Legacy of Western Foreign-Policy Failure," *Middle East Policy* XXV no.2 (2018): 142. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/doi/epdf/10.1111/mepo.12347>

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

Syrian Civil War.¹⁵⁴ 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 challenged Obama's red line policy. Yet again, the US was willing to forsake the Kurds and, in this instance, the surrounding Syrian population, if this served the US's 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.¹⁵⁵ 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's ripping up of the agreement was a symbolic act of rejecting the boundaries put in place by Western imperialism. ISIS's spread into Syria changed the US's calculation from one of little investment to larger stakes in the war against terror.¹⁵⁶ Since the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the group out of which ISIS emerged, had been formed in 2006, it was

¹⁵⁴ The Libyan intervention failed spectacularly after the dictator Muammar Gaddafi was killed, after which Libya tumbled into chaos. El-Gamal, Jasmine, "Trump is making the same mistakes in Syria that Obama did in the Middle East", para 7.

¹⁵⁵ Abboud, Samer N, *Syria*, 122.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

listed by the US as a terrorist group.¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸ The US policy in Syria changed because it no longer had to justify any involvement on humanitarian grounds; instead, the US could use the War against Terrorism as a basis to intervene in Syria.

With the necessary motivation to engage in the conflict, the Obama administration looked for a powerful actor on the ground that the US could train and financially support, because "Obama came into office with a deep aversion to continued military involvement in the Middle East."¹⁵⁹ As a result, the US turned to support the YPG. The US launched its first airstrike against ISIS in Syria on September 23, 2014, just one week after Congress approved the deployment of 400 troops to train Syrian Kurdish rebels.¹⁶⁰ The US continued to incrementally add troops to the conflict to increase the training of rebels fighting ISIS, until in December 2018, President Trump announced that the 2000 troops who had been deployed to Syria would soon be withdrawn.¹⁶¹ The US never launched a full military offensive against ISIS in support of the Syrian Kurds, nor did either the Obama or Trump administrations commit a large number of resources to the conflict; instead, the US focused its efforts on "condemn[ing] the bloodshed,

¹⁵⁷ 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>.

¹⁵⁸ Gordon, Phillip, "Bush's Middle East vision," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 45, no. 1 (2003):158. doi: 10.1080/00396330312331343366

¹⁵⁹ El-Gamal, Jasmine, "Trump is making the same mistakes in Syria that Obama did in the Middle East".

¹⁶⁰ CNN Library, "ISIS Fast Facts".

¹⁶¹ El-Gamal, Jasmine, "Trump is making the same mistakes in Syria that Obama did in the Middle East".

sen[ing] aid to refugees, half heartedly train[ing] “vetted” rebels, and bomb[ing] the Islamic State”.¹⁶² The US’s tactics successfully minimized the danger to US troops, while reducing the territorial size and power of ISIS, thereby showing that the US had successfully remained on the periphery of the conflict while carrying out its self-interested goal of continuing the War on Terrorism. Therefore, when President Trump was given an excuse—the purported defeat of ISIS—for ordering the withdrawal of US troops, he followed the Obama administration’s “deep aversion to continued military involvement in the Middle East”, and extracted the US’s troops from the conflict; at the same time, Trump tweeted, “we have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there”.¹⁶³

The US intervention into Syria was primarily undertaken not because the Syrian population was on the edge of a humanitarian disaster but because the US was concerned to reduce the international terrorist threat. Although it could be argued that preventing terrorism is a humanitarian action, in the case of Syria, humanitarianism was not the US’s primary concern. This is demonstrated by the US policy of bombing, which causes increased civilian death, and a focus on support through rhetoric rather than increased troop deployment. Even when the US did intervene in the conflict, both President Obama and Trump tried to reduce the financial and military cost to the US, leaving the Syrian Kurds to do the majority of the fighting that reduced the power of ISIS within Syria. When one peels back the surface rhetoric of liberal humanitarianism espoused by the Obama administration, it becomes clear that Obama merely continued the realpolitik trends seen in US policy throughout the Cold War, which persist,

¹⁶² Cook, Steven, “The Syrian War is Over, and America Lost.”

¹⁶³ El-Gamal, Jasmine, “Trump is making the same mistakes in Syria that Obama did in the Middle East”.

although more discernibly, during the Trump administration. Obama's 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 the US's Syrian Kurdish allies.¹⁶⁴ However, if observers looked at the US's historic *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 Trump's 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 and add additional context to US policies in relation to Syria proves especially important at this juncture. US rhetoric toward Turkey and the Turkish Kurds supports the hypothesis that the US has continued to favour a self-interested policy throughout the Syrian Civil War. Turkey and the PKK are deeply involved in the Syrian Civil War. As one would expect, the Turkish government was not enthusiastic about the possibility of having an independent Kurdish state on its southern border, which had appeared feasible before the US declared its withdrawal of support for the

¹⁶⁴ Hubbard, Ben, "Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-kurds-turkey-manbij.html>; "Trump threatens to 'devastate' Turkish economy over Syrian Kurds."

Syrian Kurdish rebels in December 2018. Throughout the conflict, the Turkish government balanced its policy by not completely supporting any one side within the conflict. Turkey officially remains a US ally; however, due to its problems with its Kurdish population, it was not willing to support the US's proxies, the Syrian Kurds.¹⁶⁵ Turkey did not directly support ISIS, having itself been subjected to attacks from the group, but was willing to allow the free movement of jihadists within Turkish territory so they could reach the frontlines and fight against the Kurds, Turkey's historic enemy.¹⁶⁶ The last ally that Turkey could have aligned itself with was the Syrian government. Turkey had been considering this option since it began to distance itself from the EU at the end of the 2000s. However, Turkey ultimately rejected the potential direct alliance with the Syrian regime and continued to support the US in its fight against ISIS without supporting the Syrian Kurds. Turkey's policy changed in the summer of 2015 when it launched attacks against US-allied Kurds on the Syria-Turkey border due to the perceived threat the Syrian Kurds strength posed to Turkey.¹⁶⁷ Turkey was especially distrustful of the US-backed YPG because the group had grown out of the PKK.¹⁶⁸ Turkey was concerned that the YPG would influence the PKK and strengthen the latter's rebellion against the Ankara government. In January 2019, Turkey continued to distance itself from the US alliance while

¹⁶⁵ Carey, Glen, Donna Abdu-Nasr, Selcan Hacaoglu and Henry Meyer, "Who's Still Fighting Who in Syria's Eight-Year War," *Blomberg*, January 14, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-14/who-s-still-fighting-in-the-syrian-war-and-why-quicktake-jqwig5e7>.

¹⁶⁶ Gunter, Michael, "Iraq, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey," *Middle East Policy* XXII, no 1 (2015): 104. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1111/mepo.12116>.

¹⁶⁷ Yildiz, Guney, "US withdrawal from Syria leaves Kurds backed into a corner," *BBC News*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46639073>.

¹⁶⁸ Stevenson, Jonathan, "The Kurds' precarious balancing act in Syria", v.

entering into talks with Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime's supporters, to negotiate a unified approach to ending the conflict.¹⁶⁹

The US reaction to Turkey's 2015 decision to launch attacks against the Kurds in Syria was fundamentally pragmatic. The US's historic relationship with Turkey as a long-time NATO ally prevented the US's abandoning the US-Turkey alliance in the same manner as the US's alliances with different Kurdish groups over the past 100 years. However, it was in the US's best interest to continue to support the Syrian Kurds rather than place a large contingent of US troops in Syria, even given Turkey's objection 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 Erdoğan threatened to forcibly remove all the Syrian Kurds from the Syrian-Turkish border area.¹⁷⁰ Initially, it appeared that the Trump administration had completely abandoned the Syrian Kurds, which would have been consistent with the US's historic policies toward the Kurds.¹⁷¹ However, on January 13, 2019, President Trump tweeted that the US would place harsh economic sanctions on Turkey if it harmed the US's Syrian Kurdish allies.¹⁷² 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

¹⁶⁹ Carey, Glen, "Who's Still Fighting Who in Syria's Eight-Year War".

¹⁷⁰ Yildiz, Guney, "US withdrawal from Syria leaves Kurds backed into a corner."

¹⁷¹ There is an interesting comparison to be drawn here with the reaction that the French had to Turkey's request for less Kurdish autonomy during the interwar period; in both situations, the powerful international actor adhered to Turkey's request at the expense of the Syrian Kurds.

¹⁷² "Trump threatens to 'devastate' Turkish economy over Syrian Kurds."

harm the US's relations with Turkey or if Trump's declaration was 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 since the end of Woodrow Wilson's presidency 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 President Trump's administration who questioned his 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 Trump administration's 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.

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