Covering the Bases
Reassessing U.S. Military Deployments in Turkey
After the July 2016 Attempted Coup d’État

John Cappello, Patrick Megahan, John Hannah, and Jonathan Schanzer

Foreword by Ambassador Eric Edelman

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Foreword

The modern Republic of Turkey remains one of the “pivotal” states in the international system. The country’s role as a U.S. treaty ally sitting astride the division between Europe and the Middle East, as a Black Sea littoral state bordering on a revanchist Russia, and an important energy hub insures that it will remain a crucial player. Since the 9/11 attacks, the U.S.-Turkish relationship has been on a rollercoaster ride of highs and lows.

While bumpy patches have been more the norm lately, there have been eras of warm ties. The EU decision to open accession talks with Turkey in December 2004 – a long-time objective of U.S. national security policy since the 1960s – stands out in that regard (and it is no coincidence that U.S. standing among the Turkish public, as measured in the Pew Charitable Trust’s poll, was at its highest then). More often than not, however, the relationship has been marked by serious differences over the political future of Iraq (and the best way to deal with the PKK challenge to Turkey emanating from the Kurdish north), how to deal with a nuclearizing Iran, and most acutely, the roiling conflict in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State (IS). It is an unfortunate fact that on occasion these differences have given rise to outbursts of popular anti-Americanism in the often febrile Turkish media.

Even before 9/11, the rise of the Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the convulsions that followed in the Middle East, the U.S.-Turkish relationship had been marked by ups and downs. The one steady element in the relationship always appeared to be the military-to-military ties that bound the two countries together. Turkey had the second largest military establishment in NATO, one of the largest International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs in the world, and important bases near the Soviet Union that made it an important military partner for the United States during the Cold War. In particular, for over 70 years, the Incirlik Air Base near Adana in southeastern Turkey played a vital role in U.S. military planning and in maintaining the “northern tier” strategy of blocking Soviet access to the eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf.

When the Cold War ended, some analysts questioned the continuing utility of Incirlik and the ongoing U.S. presence, but the first Gulf War quickly brought that debate to an end. President Turgut Ozal’s courageous decision, overriding his then chief of defense, to join the U.S.-led coalition to reverse Saddam Hussein’s aggression against Kuwait ushered in an era of very close U.S.-Turkish collaboration. By the end of the decade, President Bill Clinton proclaimed a U.S.-Turkish “strategic partnership” in his speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Today, in the wake of the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, those words seem increasingly hollow.

Even before the botched effort by elements of the military to overthrow the AKP government, Turkey was on a domestic trajectory marked by increasing authoritarianism and troubling government relationships with dangerous Islamist groups. In the wake of the coup, a rising tide of officially sanctioned and, in some cases, government-instigated anti-Americanism, coupled with the hollowing out of the Turkish military and continuing terrorist attacks by both Kurdish and Islamist extremists, have once again raised the question of the future utility of America’s continued presence at Incirlik.

Although I join most observers in continuing to believe that the U.S.-Turkish relationship is crucial and that Incirlik’s role is particularly important in the context of the anti-IS struggle, it is clearly time to face the possibility that the U.S. may, against its will, be forced to leave. This would be a serious discontinuity in the NATO alliance and the U.S.-Turkish relationship, and it ought not to be approached in a “fit of absence of mind.”

This meticulous Foundation for Defense of Democracies study provides the broader context for considering the prospects for Incirlik’s future. It not only charts the history of the base’s role and our military-to-military ties,
but it lays out the serious issues that would follow from a U.S. exit, and it also canvases the alternatives.

The best outcome would clearly be for the U.S. to remain in Incirlik for reasons that include the effectiveness of the campaign against IS and the ongoing need for U.S. extended nuclear deterrence in Europe. Yet, suggesting that the U.S. has alternatives may serve an important purpose. It can help Turkish officials recognize the importance of the U.S. connection to Turkey. It might even help preserve it.

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Introduction

The Republic of Turkey has been a reliable staging point for U.S. forces for more than six decades. Turkish bases have historically provided the U.S. military easy access to multiple theaters without having to build new infrastructure or forge new agreements. Today, American forces in Turkey are targeting the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, manning key components of the European integrated missile defense system, providing logistics for regional operations, and deterring a resurgent Russia.

However, the attempted coup of July 2016 and the war in Syria have revealed growing fractures in the U.S.-Turkish security relationship. Statements by Turkish officials in the wake of the coup suggesting that American officials were behind the failed putsch indicate that trust between the two countries is plummeting. More worrisome, these statements are now inciting anti-American sentiment across Turkey. Turkey's decision to shut down U.S. operations against IS in the immediate aftermath of the coup, albeit temporarily, was also cause for alarm, even if it was a precautionary measure.

Even before the failed coup, tensions between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the West were on the rise. At home, Erdogan has been transforming Turkey into a more authoritarian and Islamist state, undermining the rule of law and freedom of the press. Turkey's foreign policy choices, particularly those that have empowered destabilizing forces in the Middle East, have been increasingly at odds with Washington. Specifically, Ankara's support for known terrorist groups and its deliberately poor regulation of its Syrian border have exacerbated security challenges in the region. The strains have grown so great that some have suggested Turkey's place in NATO is in question. Though Turkish actions have raised fundamental questions about the nation's basic foreign policy orientation, there is no mechanism to expel a NATO member. Moreover, because Ankara's place within NATO remains crucial, Washington has endeavored to address these issues in muted tones. Indeed, access to Turkish facilities have been vital for the war against IS and will likely remain so for future crises. Keeping these installations open and secure are the top priority.¹

But continued cooperation does not mean the continuation of the status quo. In the wake of the coup, as the Turkish government engages in an extensive purge of domestic foes (both real and imagined), Turkey is unstable and unpredictable. It is now essential to determine if the estimated 3,000 U.S. servicemen or the sensitive U.S. hardware based in Turkey are in any way jeopardized. In short, an assessment is needed to examine alternative basing options in the eastern Mediterranean. Such contingency planning is crucial to protect U.S. interests. But it should not supplant or encumber ongoing efforts to restore Turkish-American ties to their previous levels of trust.

History of U.S.-Turkish Security Ties

Turkey's security partnership with the U.S. began with the Cold War, when the two allies worked closely together to contain Soviet expansion. Cooperation with Washington was natural given the increasing threat from Moscow, while Turkey's pro-Western, burgeoning multi-party democracy also appeared to share values with the West. Turkey was the recipient of U.S. assistance under the Truman Doctrine because of Soviet threats to annex

Turkish territory and control the Straits in 1945. Turkey was a natural choice when the United States sought a base close to Soviet territory. Indeed, Turkey’s unique geography allowed U.S. forces excellent access to Soviet territory from the south, as well as coverage of the Mediterranean Sea, Southern and Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Symbolically, the arrival of the U.S.S. Missouri to Istanbul in 1946 represented the first evidence of Turkey’s entrance into the Western alliance.

In 1951, the U.S. began building an airfield outside the southern city of Adana. In exchange for establishing this base and its contribution during the Korean War, Turkey was granted NATO membership and a bilateral mutual security agreement with the United States in 1952. Turkey and the U.S. signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in 1954, paving the way for the U.S. to operate inside Turkey. In late 1954, the Turkish Air Force and the U.S. agreed to share the base. The following year, the first American host unit, the 7216th Air Base Squadron, was established at Adana Air Base, which in 1958 was renamed Incirlik.

The U.S. began using the base to launch U-2 reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union. These flights quietly ended after the downing of Francis Gary Powers, a U-2 pilot, in 1960. The U.S. soon started rotating fighter squadrons through Incirlik for contingency purposes. In 1970, the Turkish Air Force even granted American squadrons access to the Konya air-to-ground and air-to-air ranges, allowing U.S. forces to conduct important training.

During the 1958 Lebanon crisis, when forces backed by Egypt and Syria threatened the pro-Western president, Camille Chamoun, the U.S. Air Force flew show-of-force missions, reconnaissance sorties, and leaflet drops from Incirlik. However, this was done without Turkish permission, owing to a loophole in the existing SOFA. American forces based in Turkey were under U.S. authority, not NATO. Moreover, the U.S. did not need Turkish permission to deploy forces to Incirlik. Providing only advance notice was sufficient. So in 1969, when Turkey and the United States signed a new accord, known as the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), it emphasized that bases in Turkey were to be used for NATO missions only.

To deter Soviet aggression and demonstrate U.S. commitment to the alliance, as it had throughout...
Europe, the U.S. deployed nuclear weapons to Turkey in 1959. The nuclear delivery systems in Turkey included Honest John unguided rockets, Jupiter ballistic missiles, gravity bombs, and atomic artillery shells. As part of a secret deal, in exchange for Soviet nuclear missiles being removed from Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. withdrew its Jupiter missiles from Turkey in 1963 (against Turkish protests). What remained were tactical nuclear weapons meant to buy time for NATO reinforcements in the event of a Soviet land invasion of Turkey.12

After the Cold War, the U.S. kept only a limited number of B-61 nuclear bombs in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey.13 Media reports suggest that at least 50 nuclear weapons are believed to still be stored at Incirlik for use by American aircraft, although their reported presence and the specific numbers remains classified. Today, the aircraft and crew certified for nuclear missions are no longer permanently stationed at the base. Moreover, Turkish air crews, who were once trained to drop nuclear weapons as part of the NATO nuclear sharing policy, are no longer certified to do so.14

During the 1991 Gulf War, even though it was not a NATO-led war, Turkey granted the U.S. permission to use Incirlik to launch strikes inside Iraq.15 After the war, the base supported NATO’s Operation Provide Comfort in 1991, and then the UN-approved Operation Northern Watch in 1997.16

Military ties between the U.S. and Turkey have been warm, but not without turbulence. For example, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the U.S. imposed an arms embargo on Turkey. The U.S. agreement in 1947 to provide assistance to Turkey stipulated that Ankara had to first receive consent from Washington to use any of its American-supplied equipment. President Lyndon Johnson, in a now infamous letter, reminded Turkey of this obligation in 1964 when an invasion of Cyprus was first contemplated.17 Though the letter delayed a Turkish intervention in Cyprus for a decade, it also prompted Turkey to increase economic ties with the Soviet Union and develop its own domestic defense industry. When the invasion did occur in 1974, Turkey was better prepared to sacrifice American assistance and turn the tables on the U.S. by revoking the 1969 DCA, suspending American military operations in the country, and allowing only NATO operations at Incirlik.18 In 1978, the U.S. folded, lifting the embargo and signing another agreement with Turkey: the 1980 Defense and Economic

Cooperation Agreement (DECA), which remains in effect today.¹⁹

The DECA is crucial to understanding America’s current position in Turkey. It defines Incirlik as an “air operations and support” base to be used for “joint defense measures” between the two countries.²⁰ American aircraft are “authorized to be stationed at Incirlik in support of NATO defense plans.”²¹ The agreement does not permit the U.S. to use the base for its own purposes and even empowers the Turkish government to determine whether the U.S. can use the base to conduct NATO missions. Turkey can also cancel U.S. access to Incirlik with three days’ notice.²²

During the 2003 war to topple Saddam Hussein, Ankara did not allow the U.S. to stage U.S. forces in Turkey for combat operations in Iraq. American war planners remained frustrated that they were not given permission to launch a northern front from Turkey at the outset of the war. According to former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. war might have yielded better results had Turkey welcomed American operations.²³ The Turkish government did, however, give the U.S. permission to use the base for logistical operations to move men and equipment in and out of Iraq.²⁴ By 2008, 74 percent of the cargo transferred to Iraq traveled through Incirlik. Had the U.S. been forced to rely on alternative routes, it would have added $160 million per year to the cost of operations in Iraq.²⁵

### U.S. and NATO Assets Currently in Turkey

Today, Turkish facilities are crucial to a number of vital U.S. and NATO missions. One of the most important is NATO’s Allied Land Command (LANDCOM) in Izmir, Turkey, which provides support and interoperability to all NATO ground forces. NATO first established a headquarters in Izmir in June 1952, then known as the Allied Land Forces Southeastern Europe, commanded by an American general with Turkish and Greek deputies. In 2003, this command converted to NATO’s Air Component Command, and in 2012 repurposed to LANDCOM.²⁶ As of June 2014, 43 U.S. personnel are permanently stationed in Izmir to support

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LANDCOM and the nearby Çiğli air station as part of the 425th Air Base Squadron.  

Turkey also plays an important role in NATO’s integrated ballistic missile defense system. In response to the growing threat to Europe from Iranian ballistic missiles, the Obama administration launched the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) in 2009. The EPAA places U.S. missile defense assets in Eastern Europe, and Aegis-equipped warships patrol the Mediterranean and Black Seas. These systems are connected to an early-warning radar in Kürecik, Turkey that became operational in early 2012. The radar’s position in Turkey provides for critical early warning to detect, track, and intercept incoming missiles from Iran. 

As the war in Syria intensified in 2012, Turkey requested that NATO deploy air defense batteries along its southern border to protect against ballistic missiles and hostile aircraft. Beginning in January 2013, the U.S., Italy, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands contributed Patriot and ASTER SMP/T missile systems on rotational deployments. As of July 2016, only Spain and Italy maintain their deployments, despite Turkish requests for additional NATO support. The U.S. did, however, deploy High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) to Turkey in May 2016 to counter IS rocket fire coming from Syria and support the offensive on IS-held territory along the border. 

As the U.S. began its campaign against the Islamic State in 2014, it requested that Turkey allow U.S. forces to use Incirlik for combat operations. Despite consecutive pledges of support, the Turkish government delayed approval – as was historically the case with many U.S. requests. In March 2015, Turkey permitted two armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to operate from Incirlik. While this provided improved capabilities beyond the three unarmed UAVs being used for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, it still severely limited operations in Syria and Iraq. It was not until an IS suicide bomber killed 32 people inside Turkey on July 20, 2015 that Ankara gave the green light to launch U.S. fighter aircraft from


Incirlik. Eventually, coalition partners from the United Kingdom, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Denmark, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar could also deploy aircraft in support of operations against IS from Incirlik.

In hindsight, Turkey’s eagerness to pressure the White House into action in Syria appears to be on the right side of history with the death toll still rising more than five years later.

It should be noted that Turkey, shortly after the Syrian civil war erupted, requested the U.S. to establish safe zones inside Syria as a condition to expanding Incirlik’s role. This request would have required a significant increase in America’s presence and role in the Syrian civil war, one that the Obama administration was unwilling to accept. This, coupled with the Obama administration’s equivocation over its chemical weapons “red line” in 2013, placed great strain on the U.S.-Turkey relationship. In hindsight, Turkey’s eagerness to pressure the White House into action in Syria appears to be on the right side of history with the death toll still rising more than five years later.

Between September and November 2015, after U.S. aircraft began operating out of Incirlik, the number of weapons striking IS targets increased by 30 percent. The short distance between bases in Turkey and IS-held territory allowed strike aircraft to spend more time over target areas and greatly reduced fuel and maintenance costs. Coalition ISR and electronic warfare platforms are also able to linger longer over targets in Syria, thus increasing the amount of intelligence collected. The operations tempo increased with KC-135 tankers and A-10 attack aircraft flying approximately a dozen sorties from Incirlik per day. The number of U.S. personnel based in Turkey has risen from 1,300 in the beginning of 2015 to roughly 3,000 in July 2016 as a result of increased operations.

In October 2015, the U.S. Air Force was, after a long delay, also able to position a Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) unit with 300 airmen at Diyarbakir Air Base in southern Turkey. These units are essential for conducting recovery operations for downed pilots. From bases in Turkey, CSAR teams flying in tilt-rotor V-22 Ospreys are able to reach deep into Syria in under one hour. In CSAR missions, minutes can mean life or death for a pilot evading capture behind enemy lines.


45. Taimur Khan, “60 Minutes to Save a Pilot Behind Enemy Lines,” The National (UAE), February 11, 2015. (http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/60-minutes-to-save-a-pilot-behind-enemy-lines#full)

In the case of the Jordanian pilot downed in December 2014, U.S. Marines based in Kuwait were dispatched on a rescue mission but failed to reach him in time. The incident led to the subsequent suspension of operations by the UAE because the Emiratis believed American CSAR assets were not located close enough to Syria.


Finally, the addition of more than 300 American and coalition special operation forces (SOF) to northern Syria in 2016 increased the need to use Turkey as a staging and logistics base. Sustaining a prolonged SOF presence on the ground requires strike, ISR, CSAR, and logistics capabilities nearby. Ground forces require air assets to respond in a timely manner when in contact with enemy forces. The U.S. has some of these assets stationed in neighboring Jordan and Iraq, but with the bulk of the fighting against IS occurring in the north of Syria, positioning them in Turkey is tactically preferable.

Mounting Stresses in U.S.-Turkish Relations

The failed military coup in July 2016 demonstrated that, while the U.S.-led coalition finally has much of the access it needs, preserving Turkey as a stable and reliable base of operations is still fraught with challenges. As forces loyal to the president quelled the putsch, they also cut electrical service to Incirlik and closed the airspace over the base for approximately 24 hours. The government defended these actions because Turkish KC-135 tankers based at Incirlik assisted the putsch.

The shutdown resulted in an interruption of operations against IS targets. It is unclear if the pause in operations also applied to the CSAR unit stationed at Diyarbakir Air Base. The interruption was short-lived, but according to U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, the subsequent purge of Turkish officers is having a negative effect on anti-IS coordination. A spike in anti-American sentiment, punctuated by small protests outside the gates of Incirlik, have also raised troubling questions about the long-term viability of the arrangement, including the safety and security of the American servicemen and the reported nuclear weapons stationed there. U.S. officials, however, dispute that any weapons are at risk.

And these are not the only concerns plaguing Ankara’s ties with the U.S. and NATO. There is ample evidence to suggest that Turkey’s southeastern frontier – the territory along Turkey’s 565-mile border to Syria – has become a gateway for an entire generation of jihadists seeking to join the war in Syria.

As IS seized areas along Turkey’s Syrian border in 2013, Ankara was deliberately slow to crack down

on foreign fighters and supplies flowing through its territory. Former U.S. government officials report that Ankara believed the jihadists would topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This was a dangerous gamble, and one that ultimately resulted in a growing presence of jihadists inside the country. Indeed, Turkey was soon home to IS recruiters and logistical figures.³⁵ It was only a matter of time before IS began to carry out attacks inside Turkey. The Pentagon, concerned by the heavy infiltration of Turkey by IS and other jihadists, ordered American military dependents living in Turkey to leave in March 2015.³⁶

Sure enough, IS carried out a spate of attacks in the country in 2015 and 2016 that killed over 200.³⁷ Turkey has since made efforts to crack down on the jihadists inside its borders, but these efforts are still insufficient. French intelligence assessed in July 2016 that as many as 100 individuals per week entered Syria from Turkey to join IS.³⁸ Western governments are also concerned by the fact that Turkey has been a key market for IS oil.³⁹ At its peak, between $1 and $2 million worth of oil was smuggled daily to bordering territories and sold through middlemen.⁴⁰

According to Turkey’s main opposition party, $800 million worth of oil from IS-occupied regions may have been sold in Turkey in 2014.⁴¹ Eventually the fall in oil prices and persistent coalition airstrikes on oil fields led to a drop in profits for IS. The crackdown on smuggling by Turkish authorities played only a minimal role.⁴²

IS has also profited from smuggling antiquities into Turkey, primarily through the border crossing near Tel Abyad before it was seized by Kurdish forces.⁴³ It is difficult to calculate the exact amount IS receives from the antiquities trade, but according to reports, Turkey, along with Lebanon, has served as a key hub for smuggling classical coins from which IS profits.⁴⁴

Turkish authorities have also been accused of actively providing material support and assisting fighters


crossing the border.\textsuperscript{65} Reports suggest that extremist financiers (mainly from Gulf countries such as Qatar and Kuwait) have camped out in hotels along the southeastern Turkish frontier, meeting with jihadist groups since 2012.\textsuperscript{66} Turkey was also alleged to have supplied weapons to jihadi groups operating along its border.\textsuperscript{67} Since 2013, accusations have come from former Turkish government officials and current opposition parties.\textsuperscript{68} On January 1, 2014, for example, the Turkish gendarmerie reportedly stopped a truck in Turkey’s Hatay province en route to Syria. They found weapons and ammunition that allegedly belong to Turkey’s intelligence agency.\textsuperscript{69} About two weeks later, on January 19, soldiers stopped and searched another group of trucks in Adana, also carrying weapons and also linked to the intelligence agency.\textsuperscript{70} Testimonies by two Turkish truck drivers involved in the Adana case pointed to direct Turkish government involvement.\textsuperscript{71} According to the Turkish government, the cargo was destined for Turkmen rebels fighting in northern Syria.\textsuperscript{72} However, Idlib province, which borders Hatay, was home to both Turkman rebels as well as several jihadi groups such as the al-Qaeda-linked group, Jabhat al-Nusra (rebranded Jabhat Fath al-Sham in July 2016).

And while some of this activity appears to have been curtailed, Turkey’s role within the coalition effort against IS has been decidedly problematic. In October 2014, Ankara agreed to host training for


2,000 moderate Syrian rebels. But even before the program was launched, it hit repeated delays because of disagreements between the U.S. and Turkey over whether the rebels would target IS or the Assad regime. The program was eventually disbanded because it could not attract enough Syrian recruits willing to fight only IS and not the regime – as Turkey had advocated.

The question of support for Kurdish fighters has also been a challenge. Kurdish forces have proven to be the most effective indigenous force fighting IS in Syria. However, Turkey intentionally obstructs efforts to support them. Turkey protested U.S. efforts to resupply Kurdish forces battling the terror group during the siege of Kobani in October 2014, and it did so as its own army sat idly watching the battle from across the border. Ankara eventually allowed Iraqi Kurdish fighters (Peshmerga) to cross through Turkish territory to reinforce the fledging defenders of Kobani, hoping to prevent further U.S. air drops to the People’s Protection Units, or YPG, defending Kobani. Turkey remained sternly opposed to coordinating with the YPG, who they see as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK),

Kurdish forces would pull-back, shelled YPG positions and launched an operation against IS in Jarabulus hoping to head-off further advances by Kurdish forces. At the time this report went to print, the Jarabulus operation was still ongoing with Arab Syrian rebel groups – backed by Turkish air and ground forces, and U.S. intelligence and air cover – seizing much of the town. Still it is unclear if the operation represents a significant shift of Turkish policy towards IS or merely a move to counter YPG advances.

And while Turkey did finally allow the coalition to operate from Incirlik, Turkey’s own contribution to the campaign has been limited. This is largely the result of the November 2015 downing of a Russian fighter by Turkish F-16s. The incident sparked a series of escalations between Moscow and Ankara, resulting in the introduction of Russian advanced air defense systems in Syria, and a subsequent reluctance of the Turkish Air Force to enter Syria. Turkish forces have since been limited to shelling IS positions along its borders. With such limited support, rebel groups have struggled to push IS away from the Turkish border and are frequently targeted by pro-regime forces, causing the U.S. to turn more of its support to the YPG and SDF.

The problems extend beyond the fight against the Islamic State, too. Ankara has allowed a number of Hamas operatives to operate unhindered within its borders for more than five years. For example Saleh Arouri, the founder of the West Bank’s Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, was suspected of raising funds for Hamas and of directing Hamas’ operations in the West Bank from Turkey until his departure (due to American pressure) in 2015. Among other things, Arouri was also believed to have launched a plot to take down the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank in 2014. Imad al-Alami, a long-time Hamas liaison with Iran, also reportedly went to Turkey for medical treatment.

While Arouri may have relocated to Qatar, Turkey remains the home of two noteworthy Hamas financial figures. According to the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Seyassah, Bakri Hanifa plays a significant role in an ongoing financial operation to move “tens of millions of dollars” to Turkey from Qatar. According to a report in Palestine Press News Agency, Maher Ubeid, another

85. Alex Fishman, “Leaving prison, returning to terror,” Ynet (Israel), October 21, 2013. (www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4443522,00.html)
Hamas financial operative, receives funds from Turkish official sources and transfers them to Hamas in Gaza via Turkish money changers. Other reports suggest that members of Hamas’ military wing may have undertaken training in Turkey, with the knowledge, support, and assistance of local authorities. After the normalization agreement between Turkey and Israel in the spring of 2016, it is unclear whether these activities are ongoing.

There are indications that the government of Turkey is involved in other malign behavior, too. In February 2015, for example, Libya’s internationally recognized prime minister, Abdullah al-Thinni, accused Turkey of sending weapons to the Islamist rebels. And in 2013, it was widely reported that senior Turkish AKP ministers were involved in a massive sanctions evasion scheme known as “Gas-for-Gold” that yielded Iran some $13 billion.

Turkish domestic politics have also been a major concern. Under Erdogan’s tenure as prime minister and then president, long before the failed coup attempt, press freedom in Turkey has dropped precipitously. Twitter accounts are regularly shut down, and hundreds of Erdogan critics have been sued or prosecuted for allegedly being supporters of Fethullah Gulen – a cleric and Erdogan’s rival living in self-imposed exile in the U.S. since 1999. Multiple opposition media outlets have been blocked all inquiries in 2013 and 2014 into alleged corruption charges against high-level government officials by an Istanbul prosecutor.

The July 2016 attempted coup has given Erdogan an excuse to further tighten his grip on power. Within days of its failure, the government began to purge the country’s state institutions of suspected Gulen supporters – the man Erdogan alleges was behind the putsch. By way of background, Erdogan and Gulen, representing two strands of political Islam in Turkey, were in a strategic political alliance in the years following the AKP’s ascendance to power. But a feud that developed between the two in 2012-2013

90. Adnan al-Tamimi ناشيونال انترست: موقف الدوحة من حماس وفلسطين لن تغير حتى لو غادر مشعل الى تركيا (National Interest: Doha’s stance on Hamas and Palestine will not change even if Mashaal leaves for Turkey), The New Khalij (UAE), January 18, 2015. (http://www.thenewkhalij.com/ar/node/8711)
has spiraled into dire proportions, with Erdogan declaring Gulenist followers to be members of a terrorist organization and ultimately blaming the network for the July coup. Since the putsch, tens of thousands of Turks in the civil service, judiciary, security establishment, media, and academia have been fired and thousands have been detained, including one-third of the Turkish generals and admirals. They were charged with supporting the coup plot.98 According to Amnesty International, detainees have been beaten and tortured during the crackdown.99 While Gulen's personal role in the coup has yet to be proven, Turkey has demanded that the U.S. extradite him, and repeatedly suggested that failure to do could jeopardize the U.S.-Turkey alliance.

The post-coup purges will also undoubtedly impact the fight against the Islamic State and the ongoing effort to temper Russian aggression. Many experienced officers that spent years building relationships with their U.S. and NATO counterparts have been jailed.100 According to former NATO Supreme Commander James Stavridis, the fallout “will have a chilling effect on military readiness and performance.”101 Statements by the commander of U.S. Central Command, Joseph Votel and National Intelligence Director James Clapper have voiced similar concerns.102 By extension, the hollowing out of the second largest military in NATO, which is responsible for securing the border with Syria, undermines the alliance at a time when it is being challenged along its flanks.103

To make matters worse, the activities of U.S. and NATO are now also viewed with increased suspicion in Turkey. This is because several Turkish Air Force members reportedly involved in the plot were stationed alongside coalition forces at Incirlik.104 After the failed coup, numerous Turkish officers working at Incirlik, including the base commander, were arrested.105 Some senior Turkish officials accused the U.S. of supporting the coup, despite a clear pledge of

support for the government by U.S. officials. Even Erdogan, responding to Votel’s concerns about the operational impact of the purges, alleged the general was supporting the coup plotters, further enflaming anti-American sentiment.

Negative attitudes towards the U.S. and the West among the Turkish public were already on the rise before the coup. Attacks by Turkish citizens against American servicemen stationed in Turkey had been documented in recent years. With tensions now at an all-time high, U.S. and NATO personnel could very well be in danger.

Assessing Challenges and Opportunities

While past challenges associated with U.S. military forces stationed in Turkey have been resolved through determined diplomacy, the troubling trends and questions of growing instability in the country necessitate a thorough review of the consequences of continuing to station sensitive and strategic military assets there. This is not to suggest that the U.S. should immediately seek to withdraw assets from Turkey. Indeed, it is still too early for that conversation. Turkish installations continue to provide important tactical and strategic solutions for U.S. objectives. Moreover, any suggestion that the U.S. is scaling down or abandoning its bases in Turkey could drive further divisions between Ankara, Washington, and NATO. However, it would be irresponsible, given recent events and continuing trend lines, not to examine options for alternative basing for critical strategic assets.

It would be irresponsible, given recent events and continuing trend lines, not to examine options for alternative basing for critical strategic assets.

Thanks to the campaign against IS, some viable alternatives are already in use and could offer an alternative to Turkish installations. And it is not uncommon for the United States to rebalance its assets, depending upon the political climate. For example, at its peak, Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia supported as many as 5,000 troops and 200 aircraft. However, after the Saudis refused to allow American aircraft to launch strikes from Saudi territory into Afghanistan in 2001 and during the second Iraq war, the U.S. moved many of the assets to al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar in 2003. Moreover, the Saudis also never signed a Status of Forces Agreement, which would have protected American servicemen from being tried in local courts. But most importantly, the Saudis were never entirely comfortable with the presence of non-Muslim forces on their soil (a point that al-Qaeda exploited).

The decision to move assets from Prince Sultan Air Base to al-Udeid was a relatively simple equation. Pentagon planners had an alternative that was close by and in a country eager to host U.S. forces. There are similar alternatives for Turkey today. Many of the other installations around the region that are currently being used, particularly those in the Gulf states, are not ideal solutions given their distance from ongoing theaters of operation – thus the strong desire to use Turkey’s bases. But a handful of options within neighboring countries could absorb assets based in Turkey while retaining close access to key areas. The following are some alternatives to Incirlik, should they become necessary.

**RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus**

One secure installation with convenient access to the eastern Mediterranean is the British Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Akrotiri. Located on the southern tip of Cyprus, RAF Akrotiri sits on a peninsula that became sovereign UK territory under the 1960 Treaty of Establishment, which granted independence to the Republic of Cyprus.\(^{112}\) The airfield was established in 1955 when the island’s main civil airport was closed due to terrorist attacks. It quickly grew as British forces withdrew from outposts east of Suez, peaking in the 1960s and 1970s,

when it hosted several RAF squadrons. However, by the end of the 1980s, only one RAF squadron remained. The base has supported recent British and allied operations during the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the 2006 evacuation of noncombatants from Lebanon, the 2011 Libyan intervention, and the current campaign against IS in Syria and Iraq. 113

As of December 2015, the base supported as many as ten RAF Tornado strike aircraft, six Typhoon fighters, three C-130 transports, a Voyager tanker aircraft, four Griffin helicopters, and four CH-47 heavy-lift helicopters – many of which are supporting the campaign against IS. 114 According to the RAF, the base contains “sufficient bulk aviation fuel stores, explosive storage and dispersed aircraft parking for high-tempo air operations.” The British government is presently refurbishing the air base to accommodate larger aircraft. 115

The U.S. has frequently used RAF Akrotiri during the last four decades. In 1974, the U.S. stationed U-2 spy planes at the base to monitor the ceasefire between Israel and Egypt. 116 U-2 missions continued from the British facility in 2008 and 2013 to monitor Hezbollah in Lebanon, gather intelligence over Turkey and northern Iraq, and allegedly performed ISR missions over Syria. 117

The U.S. also used the base to evacuate American citizens from Lebanon in 2006. 118

The British government has welcomed other allies to use the base, too. The French Air Force was invited to launch strikes from Akrotiri in the wake of the November 2015 Paris terror attacks. 119

As of December 2014, the facility lacks key support facilities, including a hospital. 120 With a minor investment, however, the base could become a vital asset for both the U.S. and UK. Given the close political and military relationship between the historical allies, it would be reasonable to expect that the U.S. would be granted long-term access to the base. As is the case with Turkey, this would not mean uninhibited use of RAF Akrotiri for unilateral U.S. interests, but with the U.S. and UK “special relationship” far more instep than with Ankara, an improvement in operational flexibility is likely. Additionally, in times of crisis, there would likely be few objections to operational use of assets stationed there.

**Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, Jordan**

One Jordan-based facility, which has played a prominent role in the battle against IS, is another attractive location. Muwaffaq Salti Air Base is located

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in Azraq, eastern Jordan, and was first used by U.S. aircraft in 1996 to support the no-fly zones over Iraq. Today, Muwaffaq supports a range of coalition aircraft striking IS.\(^{121}\) The base, also referred to as Shaheed Muwaffaq, has two runways capable of accommodating all aircraft in the U.S. inventory. Situated about 35 miles from the Syrian border, it could also be used to support ground operations, including training Syrian rebels.\(^{122}\) While Jordan has a number of available airfields, this one is particularly attractive, given its size and remote location.

U.S. ties with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan are strong. As one of the most reliable allies in the region, the U.S. granted Jordan major non-NATO ally (MNNA) status in 1996.\(^{123}\) Jordan hosts the annual Eager Lion training exercise, a large-scale multilateral exercise inaugurated in 2011 that now includes up to 20 coalition partners and more than 12,500 participants, simulating a variety of military scenarios.\(^{124}\) In 2013, in response to the Syrian civil war, Central Command built a forward command center at the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC) near Amman.\(^{125}\) That same year, the U.S. deployed Patriot missile batteries and a squadron of F-16s, which participated in Eager Lion. The F-16s remained in Jordan following the exercise to reinforce Jordan’s defenses,\(^{126}\) and were later used to conduct strikes on IS from Muwaffaq.\(^{127}\) The U.S. has increased its strike missions from Jordan against IS targets and has positioned HIMARS to provide additional fire support to Syrian rebels fighting IS along the border.\(^{128}\) As the coalition supports the expansion of a southern front against IS, the U.S. will likely deploy more resources to Jordan.\(^{129}\)

Increasing the American presence in Jordan is not risk-free, however. The country has become less stable with the influx of more than one million refugees.\(^{130}\) In June 2016, Russian aircraft reportedly bombed outposts near the Jordan-Syria border that were used by U.S. and U.K. Special Forces to support local forces battling IS.\(^{131}\) IS has also conducted at least one attack on the border, killing seven Jordanian guards in June 2016. Additional attacks – while not claimed by IS – have targeted Jordanian intelligence personnel.

officers at the Baqaa Palestinian refugee camp in June, and two Americans were killed at a training facility in Amman in November 2015.\footnote{132}

Risks notwithstanding, Jordan has contributed significantly to the IS campaign and has pursued IS operatives relentlessly within its borders.\footnote{133} After IS killed a downed Jordanian pilot in early 2015, the kingdom responded with three consecutive days of strikes into Syria. It then expanded strikes into Iraq, and even deployed ground troops to the border as a show of force.\footnote{134} The U.S., seeking to encourage Jordan, has pledged a wide range of support, including a more rapid delivery of arms to combat IS.\footnote{135} Further, in early May 2015, Jordan became the first site for the U.S.-led train and equip program for Syrian rebels to combat IS.\footnote{136}

Finally, it is worth noting that a number of coalition partners have deployed aircraft to Jordan to support the fight against IS. Both the UAE and Bahrain deployed there to benefit from the country’s proximity to the battlefield.\footnote{137} France, Belgium, and the Netherlands also deployed fighters to Jordan to conduct strikes within Iraq.\footnote{138}

In short, Muwaffaq is an ideal forward base geographically, and its facilities are robust, enabling a full spectrum of missions. No less important, Jordan is an eager partner in the fight against IS, and its politics as a moderate Arab state are crucial for coalition building.

**Bases in Iraq**

The United States operated dozens of bases in Iraq between the launch of the war in 2003 and the 2011 withdrawal of coalition forces. Many of these bases have remained empty since the American departure and could be repurposed. However, with the addition of more U.S. ground forces, including the “expeditionary targeting force” for direct action against IS, and an expanding train and equip mission, the fate of the bases is still being determined.\footnote{139}


5,000 U.S. troops are dispersed throughout a handful of Iraqi installations, including Baghdad International Airport, Erbil International Airport, Al-Asad air base, al-Taqaddum air base, the Besmaya Combat Training Center, and Camp Taji. There are still multiple risks associated with bases in Iraq due to the proximity of IS forces and Iranian-backed militias. A U.S. Marine was killed on March 19, 2016 in northern Iraq when an IS rocket attack struck an American firebase 12 miles from the front line. In February 2015, IS forces penetrated the perimeter of Al-Asad, at the time home to 300 American personnel, before being repelled.

Furthermore, several Shia-militia groups, designated as terrorist groups by the U.S. and supported by Iran, are operating in Iraq with impunity. Thus, the two most viable options are both in the largely pro-American, semi-autonomous Kurdish region.

Irbil International Airport, Iraqi Kurdistan

Irbil International Airport in Iraqi Kurdistan is in a relatively secure location. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which maintains a long and warm relationship with the United States, controls the facility. After the U.S. invaded Iraq and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein, the KRG worked closely with U.S. forces. During this time, Irbil and particularly its airport received significant investment from the KRG to attract foreign business. The facility has grown and can now easily accommodate large aircraft.

The airport hosts two runways. The biggest, at 4,800 meters (15,700 feet), is one of the longest runways in the world. The facility can support the largest aircraft in U.S. military service (the C-5 Galaxy) and commercial


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service (the AN-225). The Irbil airport reportedly also serves as a CIA station, which has expanded in recent years, and hosts a U.S. CSAR unit since February 2015. However, with passenger and cargo traffic on the rise, there is potential for competition over limited resources. Moreover, the airport’s close proximity to Irbil, a major population center, raises operational security concerns that non-military personnel could observe sensitive American military activity and relay that intelligence to hostile forces.

### Bashur Airfield, Iraqi Kurdistan

The small Bashur airfield, situated roughly 25 miles northeast of Irbil, offers another alternative. On March 26, 2003, when the U.S. opened the northern front against Saddam’s regime, around 1,000 special operators and members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team landed at Bashur and set up a base to begin flying in heavy equipment. Elements of the 86th Contingency Response Group quickly prepared the airfield for operations. Within a week, 84 aircraft, including C-130 and C-17 transport aircraft, delivered M1 Abrams tanks, as well as 6 million pounds of cargo and 3,000 troops. After 25 days, 350 flights landed and 21 million pounds of material were delivered. However, within a month, runway conditions deteriorated and operations moved to Kirkuk.

The Pentagon considered making Bashur a permanent base to replace Incirlik in 2003 when Turkey refused to provide the U.S. access. This never occurred, however, and the reasons were not made public. Reports suggest that as of February 2015, preparations were being made to reestablish Bashur as a base for U.S. air operations against IS. There are no indications that the U.S. is presently using the airfield.

The political challenges of establishing U.S. airfields in Kurdistan are substantial. Chief among them will be the Iraqi government’s concerns about Kurdish independence. Establishing a U.S. base inside Iraqi Kurdistan without agreement from Baghdad could be seen as U.S. support for Kurdish independence. No less


152. “Airport Statistics,” Erbil International Airport, accessed December 1, 2014. (http://erbilairport.com/ABUT01/F_ABUT01_02_06.aspx)


of an issue would be the protests from Turkey, which has been loath to acknowledge Kurdish independence, even though its ties with the KRG are quite strong. Investing in Iraq also puts U.S. forces and assets closer to Iran, which continues to gain influence over the government in Iraq and within Kurdish politics.

### Conclusion

Even in the wake of the failed coup, the Pentagon continues to insist that its partnership with Turkey is “very strong.” However, it cannot be denied that the relationship is being tested. Washington is increasingly alarmed over the massive, anti-democratic purge taking place in Turkey, reflecting an overall decline in rule of law. And the acrimony is difficult to dismiss. Amidst charges that Washington was behind the coup, it is not unthinkable that Erdogan and the AKP could again limit U.S. operations in Turkey or even call for a complete withdrawal of American forces. Should the political situation in Turkey deteriorate further, security concerns may also force the U.S. to reposition resources.

Discussions regarding the future of U.S. and NATO assets in Turkey should be viewed as contingency planning. The goal should not be to degrade Turkey’s place in the alliance or to supplant it. If anything, these discussions should be viewed as an important moment to reinforce why moving American assets is not the preferred course of action. It must be stressed that the U.S.-Turkey partnership is in the interest of both countries and should therefore be brought more in sync. Indeed, any pressure applied should be done delicately and in coordination with NATO members. But signaling to Erdogan that the U.S. is not solely dependent on Turkey could help to put the relationship back on equal footing. In 2003, the Turkish parliament failed to authorize U.S. forces to invade Iraq through Turkey in part because Ankara did not believe Washington had an alternative plan – namely, the invasion of Iraq through the south instead of the northern front. The U.S. should avoid repeating that mistake and communicate its options more effectively.

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Furthermore, it is important to remember that while tensions are running high, Western ties with Turkey have weathered other storms. For example, Erdogan suggested he would take Turkey out of the U.S. and NATO fold before, including requests that Russia allow Turkey into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in response to the slow EU accession process. The Turkish president ultimately elected to remain in the NATO fold. Similarly, Erdogan threatened to purchase a Chinese missile defense system in defiance of his NATO partners’ objections in order to gain concessions by competing U.S. and European offers, but the deal


was subsequently scrapped when more favorable offers did not come. In other words, the Turkish president, despite his bluster, appears to understand that his country needs its Western alliances.

It is also important to remember that discussions about American assets in Turkey need not be seen as an “all or nothing” equation. If necessary, Ankara and Washington might settle on a new arrangement stipulating that some assets stay and some assets go. But no matter what is agreed upon, the U.S. must first seek guarantees from Turkish authorities that American personnel, equipment, and facilities will be properly protected for as long as they are located there. With anti-American rhetoric on the rise, Ankara should demonstrate clearly that the Turkish government is taking steps to reduce risks to Americans within the country. With nuclear weapons reportedly stored at Incirlik, Turkish authorities should be reminded that the security of that facility is in Turkey’s interests as well. If Ankara cannot ensure security for the U.S. and its equipment, Washington should begin to pursue alternatives.

Whether in conjunction with exploring alternatives for Incirlik, or as a standalone issue, the reported stockpile of nuclear weapons at Incirlik requires careful consideration. Apart from their deterrent value as tangible evidence of U.S. commitment to Turkey’s defense, there is good reason to believe that U.S. nuclear weapons help dissuade Ankara from pursuing its own nuclear option. Facing threats from Russia and a potentially nuclear-armed Iran, Turkey may be provoked to acquire its own nuclear arms if it feels the U.S. is revoking its nuclear deterrent. Thus, so long as Turkey remains stable and a committed member of NATO, and U.S. government assurances regarding the stockpile’s security are correct, keeping the weapons in Turkey may yet be the preferred outcome.

**With anti-American rhetoric on the rise, Ankara should demonstrate clearly that the Turkish government is taking steps to reduce risks to Americans within the country.**

If new basing arrangements were to become necessary, it is important to keep in mind a number of broader U.S. military equities that would be at stake in any move away from Turkey. Because of technical or strategic limitations, some aspects may be harder to relocate in the region. These include the early warning radar at Kurecik, CSAR at Diyarbakir, key support elements to SOF operating within Syria, and nuclear weapons. Any review of alternative basing options must include practical solutions for these issues. All would take time to implement.

In the short-term, the U.S. might consider deploying future rotations of American strike, ISR, and refueling aircraft intended for Incirlik to the RAF Akrotiri and Muwaffaq Salti air bases. Given Muwaffaq’s proximity to Syrian and Iraqi battlefields, it would be the most suitable short-term solution for tactical fighters and medium-range UAVs such as Reapers and Predators.

Meanwhile, because of RAF Akrotiri’s secure location and distance from operational theaters, it would be ideal for command and control and larger, more vulnerable support aircraft such as KC-135 tankers, C-17 and C-130 transports, and Navy P-3 and P-8 surveillance aircraft to be stationed there. Any long-term fighter deployments to address broader security needs in the eastern Mediterranean would be better placed in Cyprus as well.

Washington might also consider deploying more of its tactical assets (UAVs, transport, and rotary-wing aircraft) to Irbil International Airport for counter-IS operations. However, because of political restraints with Baghdad

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and surrounding countries, Iraqi Kurdistan does not currently represent a long-term solution. Above all, access to Jordanian, British, and Kurdish installations, even if short-term or conditional, will be necessary if any assets are to be diverted from Incirlik.

Finally, the coalition train and equip program for Syrian groups should be concentrated within Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom already supports a robust training program and has easy access to IS battlefields.

The discussion about moving sensitive assets from Turkey will not be an easy one. For this reason, we strongly recommend that the Pentagon, National Security Council, House Armed Service Committee, Government Accountability Office, and/or the Congressional Budget Office begin to explore the strategic and budgetary costs of repositioning American forces in the region. Assessments and hearings would help identify American concerns and allow U.S. decision makers to gain a better understanding of the current challenges and opportunities.

In the end, beyond prudent contingency planning, the discussion would send an important message to Ankara that while we are not eager to redeploy, we will consider it as long as Turkey’s policies – both domestic and foreign – are incongruent with ours. At the very least, we will examine our alternatives while making every effort behind the scenes to preserve a crucial and mutually beneficial alliance that we would like to see continue throughout the twenty-first century and beyond.

But Ankara would not be the only intended audience. This exercise should send a message to other regional powers that the United States seeks strong partnerships with allies that share common values, interests, and vision. More importantly, it will send a message that the United States is committed to ensuring that it has the flexibility and leverage it needs to secure its vital interests in a volatile, fast-changing region.
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