

The Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy: Why Societal Ties Are an Anchor in Bilateral Relations

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Abstract

This paper challenges two prevailing narratives about U.S.-Turkey relations: first, that international and individual-level factors are responsible for volatility in the relationship and second, that bilateral relations are uniformly bleak. In contrast to these perspectives, this paper proposes a domestic and institutional explanation for the rising volatility of U.S.-Turkey relations and conceptualizes societal ties as an anchor in the bilateral relationship. This paper advances two inter-related arguments. First, I argue that a key driver of volatility in U.S.-Turkey relations since 2016 is the deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish foreign policymaking. In the United States, the root cause of deinstitutionalization is intensifying polarization over foreign policy, fueled by the rise of populism. In Turkey, by contrast, foreign policy has deinstitutionalized through personalization: the steady concentration of decision-making power in the hands of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Second, against this backdrop of deinstitutionalization, I show that societal ties between the United States and Turkey provide a uniquely stable and enduring area of bilateral cooperation. I provide evidence for this argument in two key domains: 1) civil society and media and 2) higher education. These societal linkages, I argue, are often resilient precisely because they are disconnected from domestic politics and foreign policy. These societal ties should thus be understood not as agents that can reshape bilateral relations but as anchors that prevent the two nations from drifting apart.

Keywords: foreign policy analysis, bureaucratic politics, U.S. foreign policy, Turkish foreign policy, political polarization, civil society, media, higher education

1. Introduction

Why have relations between the United States and Turkey experienced increasing volatility over the past decade, and what factors continue to bind these treaty allies together? By investigating these questions, this paper challenges two dominant narratives about contemporary U.S.-Turkey relations. First, scholars often attribute volatility in the U.S.-Turkey relationship to changes in the *international* system or the *individuals* in power. At the international level, scholars such as Reynolds and Ovali argue that the shift toward a multipolar world order and shrinking power imbalance between the United States and Turkey has eroded bilateral cooperation; at the individual level, Eissenstat documents how Turkey's

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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has left a deep imprint on Turkish foreign policy.¹ Building upon a different literature on political institutions and bureaucratic politics, this paper contributes a domestic *institutional* explanation by arguing that the deinstitutionalization of foreign policy processes in both the United States and Turkey since 2016 has undermined bilateral relations.

What is more, this paper complicates the prevailing narrative that U.S.-Turkey relations are almost uniformly bleak. In recent scholarly work, Reynolds observes that the bilateral relationship is “fading and fraying,” while Coşkun notes that this “distressed partnership” is “now characterized by benign neglect.”² Studies by Ovalı and Özdikmenli, Balta and Elçi, and Köstem et al. identify currents of anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism in Turkish political history and public opinion.³ Nonetheless, this paper shows that there are still limited bright spots in the relationship, especially in the realm of societal linkages. Policymakers should seek to cultivate these areas of opportunity in U.S.-Turkey relations while also acknowledging their limitations.

By disaggregating U.S.-Turkey relations into their political and societal dimensions, this paper observes a paradox. At the same time that both U.S. and Turkish foreign policy have become increasingly volatile, societal ties between the two nations have largely proven resilient. To explain this paradox, this paper advances two inter-related arguments.

First, I argue that a key driver of volatility in U.S.-Turkey relations since 2016 is the *deinstitutionalization* of both U.S. and Turkish foreign policymaking—that is, the waning influence of professional foreign policymaking institutions. In U.S. foreign policy, this deinstitutionalization is evident in policy flip-flops, for instance on U.S. support for democracy or the Syrian Kurdish forces, and in the disproportionate influence of individual policymakers, such as former U.S. Senator Bob Menendez. In Turkish foreign policy, Turkey’s purchase of the S-400 missile system and on-and-off support for Sweden’s NATO accession are just two manifestations of deinstitutionalization. The deinstitutionalization of foreign policy in both countries helps explain why U.S.-Turkey relations have proven so volatile since 2016 across diverse issues, from the Syrian conflict to cooperation within NATO.

While both countries are experiencing deinstitutionalization, U.S. and Turkish foreign policy have deinstitutionalized in different ways and for different reasons. In the United States, the root cause of deinstitutionalization is intensifying *polarization* over foreign policy caused by the rise of populism, especially since 2016.⁴ With the emergence of Donald Trump

¹ Michael A. Reynolds, “From Contentious yet Robust to Fraying and Fading: Thoughts on US-Turkish Relations since 1945,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Ali Şevket Ovalı, “System, State and the Individual: A Comparative Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Türkiye-U.S. Relations,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Howard Eissenstat, “After the Honeymoon: US-Turkish Relations in the 21st Century,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023.

² Reynolds, “From Contentious yet Robust to Fraying and Fading;” Alper Coşkun, “Turkey and the United States Need to Redefine the Paradigm in Their Relationship,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Coşkun, “How Washington and Ankara Can Recover from Their Latest Setback,” *Carnegie Endowment*, May 9, 2024, accessed date November, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/05/turkey-us-erdogan-postponed-visit-fallout?lang=en>

³ Ali Şevket Ovalı and İlkim Özdikmenli, “Ideologies and the Western Question in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 9, no. 1 (2020): 105-126; Evren Balta and Ezgi Elçi, “‘I Cannot Hail Oppression’: The Rise of Civilizational Anti-Americanism in Turkey,” presented at *Continuities and Changes in Türkiye-U.S. Relations Conference*, Ankara, Turkey, 2023; Efe Tokdemir, Melike Metintaş, and Seçkin Köstem, “A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation of Turkish Public Opinion towards the United States,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 14, no. 1 (2024): 1-24.

⁴ I thank Howard Eissenstat for his insightful comment that the rise of populism in 2016 was a critical juncture at which polarization over foreign policy widened. On the rise of polarization in the United States, see Thomas Carothers, “The Long Path of Polarization in the United States,” in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 65–92; Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue,

as de facto leader of the Republican party, U.S. administrations from different political parties have taken divergent stances on key issues for the U.S.-Turkey relationship, such as support for human rights and the Syrian Kurds. At the same time, partisan gridlock in Washington means that individual policymakers can exert inordinate influence over foreign policy, for instance by obstructing congressional action. In Turkey, by contrast, foreign policy has deinstitutionalized through *personalization*: the steady concentration of decision-making power in the hands of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and marginalization of the foreign policy bureaucracy, especially after the 2018 shift to an executive presidential system.⁵

Against this backdrop of deinstitutionalization, societal ties between the U.S. and Turkey provide a uniquely stable and institutionalized area for bilateral cooperation. I provide evidence for this argument by analyzing two key areas of societal interaction: 1) civil society and media and 2) higher education. In civil society, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters without Borders have linked Turkey's robust civil society to international communities for decades, and U.S. grant-makers have built sustained relationships with Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although international civil society organizations in Turkey interact with only a minority of Turkish society at large, transnational civil society linkage is nonetheless an important component of societal ties between the U.S. and Turkey.⁶ In higher education, institutions such as the Turkish Fulbright Commission, the American Research Institute in Turkey, and Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities have endured through decades of turbulence in U.S.-Turkey relations. The depth and persistence of these societal ties is a bright spot in U.S.-Turkey relations.

Yet while these societal ties are uniquely stable, they are also politically marginal. Indeed, I argue that societal ties are often enduring precisely because they are insulated from domestic politics and foreign policy. In civil society, by conducting interviews with Turkish civil society representatives, I find that Turkish and international NGOs are largely disconnected from Turkey's public policy process.⁷ Online media organizations funded by U.S. grant-makers typically fail to reach the average consumer of news in Turkey. In the domain of higher education, drawing on an analysis of 12 existing or defunct Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities, as well as correspondence with nine leaders of such programs, I find that these programs are sometimes unstable when they rely on funding from the U.S. or Turkish national governments and typically focus on history and the humanities, rather than contemporary foreign policy or politics.⁸

At a time when U.S. and Turkish foreign policymaking has become deinstitutionalized, bilateral societal linkages in civil society, media, and higher education remain enduring and robust. Yet it is important to be clear-eyed in acknowledging that these societal ties have

⁵ "How Americans Were Driven to Extremes," *Carnegie Endowment*, September 25, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/09/how-americans-were-driven-to-extremes?lang=en>

⁶ On the personalization of Turkey's foreign policy and Erdoğan's foreign policy outlook, see Eissenstat, "After the Honeymoon."

⁷ For a five-part conceptualization of linkage to the West that includes transnational civil society linkage, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "International Linkage and Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005): 20–34.

⁸ The author conducted six interviews with Turkish civil society leaders for related research on human rights and the rule of law in Turkey. See, Andrew O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy: Minoritarian Courts, Audience Costs, and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey," *SSRN*, August 30, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4465840

⁹ Although, as Lockman notes, many of the early builders of Middle East Studies in the United States were informed by U.S. national security priorities and had previously served in the U.S. government, policy influence has largely shifted away from university centers toward think tanks and advocacy organizations. See, Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

limited connection to or influence over policymakers. Thus, these societal linkages should be understood not as agents with the power to reshape U.S.-Turkey relations but as *anchors* that prevent the two nations from drifting apart.

2. The Bureaucratic Politics Model and the Deinstitutionalization of U.S. and Turkish Foreign Policy

In arguing that domestic political institutions shape foreign policy decision-making, this paper builds upon an influential literature on bureaucratic politics. In his classic work in this tradition, Allison challenges the “Rational Actor” model, which conceptualizes foreign policy decisions as the “purposive acts of unified national governments.”⁹ Through his analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, Allison argues that this model must be “supplemented, if not supplanted, by frames of reference that focus on the governmental machine—the organizations and political actors involved in the policy process.”¹⁰ As Allison and Halperin elaborate, this “Bureaucratic Politics Model” posits that a given foreign policy decision should be understood not as “a single rational choice,” but rather as “a result of bargaining among players positioned hierarchically in the government.”¹¹

This bureaucratic politics model was principally developed to explain U.S. foreign policy decision-making, but it has offered a valuable conceptual lens for studying non-Western cases as well, including Turkey. However, these non-Western case studies highlight that the power of bureaucratic agencies should not be taken as a given, but rather as a variable. That is, whereas scholars in the United States may safely assume that bureaucracies have some decision-making power, researchers outside the United States show that the power of bureaucracies can *vary* over time.

Indeed, bureaucratic politics studies of Turkey are striking because they demonstrate how elected governments can strategically reduce or remove “traditional restraints on foreign policy.”¹² In a rare scholarly piece that analyzes Turkey’s foreign policy bureaucracy through in-depth data analysis, including interviews with more than 61 Turkish foreign policymakers, Gülen identifies how the elected AKP government has fought “turf wars in the foreign policy bureaucracy...to undermine the involvement of bureaucrats in decision-making processes.”¹³ As Gülen further demonstrates, the AKP government used bureaucratic tactics, such as generating competition among state agencies within the foreign policy bureaucracy, to ultimately gain the upper hand over bureaucratic actors in foreign policy decision-making.¹⁴ Contributing to these findings, in an analysis of the changing sociology of elites within Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm documents how “the emergence of a new clique of ruling elites subordinate to political elites...led to the politicisation of the foreign policy decision-making process in the post-2011 period.”¹⁵

⁹ Graham T. Allison and Philip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis - 2nd Edition* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1999), 4–5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, “Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications,” *World Politics* 24, no. S1 (1972): 40–79.

¹² Ersel Aydınli and Onur Erpul, “Elite Change and the Inception, Duration, and Demise of the Turkish–Israeli Alliance,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2021): 2.

¹³ Berkay Gülen, “Turf Wars in Foreign Policy Bureaucracy: Rivalry between the Government and the Bureaucracy in Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18, no. 4 (2022): 1–20; Berkay Gülen, “Who Is in Charge of Making Decisions?” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2023).

¹⁴ Gülen, “Who Is in Charge of Making Decisions?”

¹⁵ Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, “The Sociology of Diplomats and Foreign Policy Sector: The Role of Cliques on the Policy-Making Process,” *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2021): 558–573.

In order to understand variation in the degree to which bureaucratic constraints influence and stabilize foreign policy decision-making, this paper employs a Huntingtonian definition of institutionalization.¹⁶ Whereas Allison's model, developed in the U.S. context, assumes that bureaucratic institutions have the power to shape outcomes, Huntington's approach usefully acknowledges that the strength of institutions and their influence on foreign policy decisions can vary over time. A country's foreign policy apparatus is more institutionalized to the extent that it scores high on Huntington's four criteria of institutionalization, which measure an institution's age, complexity, autonomy, and unity. Thus, Huntington's approach, unlike Allison's, enables scholars to identify when and why foreign policy has experienced deinstitutionalization. Applying Huntington's definition, I argue that U.S. and Turkish foreign policy reveal deficits of institutionalization for different criteria. These distinct patterns emerge because deinstitutionalization has different causes in the United States and Turkey. Whereas polarization over foreign policy is at the root of deinstitutionalization in the United States, personalization of political power is the core issue in Turkey.

2.1. Defining (De)institutionalization

Following Huntington's path-breaking work, this paper defines institutionalization as "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability."¹⁷ In Huntington's influential formulation, the level of institutionalization can be identified and measured using four criteria.

The first criterion is the *age* of an institution, or what Huntington termed "adaptability."¹⁸ As Huntington observed, "The more challenges that have arisen in [an institution's] environment and the greater its age, the more adaptable it is."¹⁹ Thus, he wrote, "the longer an organization or procedure has been in existence, the higher the level of institutionalization."²⁰ Although younger, newly created institutions may be more influential in decision-making processes, as Drezner identifies, Huntington's definition indicates that older institutions are more likely to continue to survive and remain entrenched in the future.²¹

This first criterion suggests that the foreign policy apparatuses in the United States and Turkey exhibit different levels of institutionalization. In the United States, the National Security Council—the quarterback of the inter-agency policy process—has existed for more than 75 years since its establishment in 1947.²² By comparison, Turkey's executive presidency—the current hub of foreign policymaking—has existed for less than a decade since its ratification in Turkey's 2017 constitutional amendments.²³ To be sure, in both countries, the U.S. Department of State and Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the bureaucratic agencies charged with foreign affairs, are much older institutions. Nonetheless, significant decision-making power has shifted in the United States toward the National

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1973), 12–24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ Daniel W. Drezner, "Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 733–749.

²² John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush – 1st Edition* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1991).

²³ Kemal Kirisci and Ilke Toygur, "Turkey's New Presidential System and a Changing West: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkey-West Relations," *Brookings Institute*, January, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/turkeys-new-presidential-system-and-a-changing-west/>

Security Council, which coordinates foreign policy across the State Department, Defense Department, and USAID, and in Turkey toward the office of the presidency.

Huntington's second criterion of institutionalization is an organization's *complexity*: "The more complicated an organization it is, the more highly institutionalized it is."²⁴ By this measure, a foreign policy apparatus is more institutionalized to the extent that it is organized into functionally distinct and hierarchically organized subunits, such as bureaus for different regions or functional issues. Conversely, personalization of power represents the polar opposite of institutionalization. As Huntington observed, "The simplest political system is that which depends on one individual."²⁵

Again, by this criterion, U.S. and Turkish foreign policy show distinct patterns of deinstitutionalization. In both countries, foreign policy is organized into complex bureaucracies. In the Turkish case, however, foreign policy decision-making is centralized in the hands of the president, rather than shared with this bureaucracy.²⁶ In Turkey today, proximity to the president may thus be a greater source of influence than one's position within an organizational hierarchy.

The third criterion that Huntington proposes is an institution's *autonomy*. This criterion of institutionalization measures "the extent to which political organizations and procedures exist independently of other social groupings and methods of behavior."²⁷ An autonomous institution, in other words, is "insulated" from outside influences on its behavior and is not merely "the instrument of a social group—family, clan, class."²⁸

Assessing the autonomy of U.S. and Turkish foreign policy, this paper suggests that U.S. and Turkish foreign policy both lack autonomy, but in distinctive ways. In the United States, lobbyists, special interests, and foreign influence operations exert significant sway over foreign policymaking, as the recent investigations into former Senator Bob Menendez and former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn illustrate.²⁹ Although the U.S. State Department may be responsible for executing foreign policy, lobbyists and special interests have found avenues to influence foreign policy decision-making by swaying powerful members of Congress and even the president's national security advisor. In Turkey, by comparison, foreign policy lacks autonomy because it is closely linked to the president's fortunes and is "geared mainly to attain regime security and facilitate regime survival."³⁰

Huntington's final criterion of institutionalization is *unity*: "The more unified and

²⁴ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶ Kirisci and Toygur, "Turkey's New Presidential System;" Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, Evren Balta, and Andrew O'Donohue, "Turkey, Russia, and the West: Reassessing Persistent Volatility, Asymmetric Interdependence, and the Syria Conflict," *Istanbul Policy Center*, April 2020, accessed date November, 2023. <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/Document/reassessing-persistent-volatility-asymmetric-interdependence-and-the-syria-conflict-93d479/reassessing-persistent-volatility-asymmetric-interdependence-and-the-syria-conflict-93d479.pdf>.

²⁷ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ Benjamin Weiser, Nicholas Fandos, and William K. Rashbaum, "Menendez and Wife Face Charges of Plotting to Make Him a Foreign Agent," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2023, November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/nyregion/robert-menendez-foreign-agent-charge.html>; Peter Baker and Matthew Rosenberg, "Michael Flynn Was Paid to Represent Turkey's Interests During Trump Campaign," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/us/politics/michael-flynn-turkey.html>; William K. Rashbaum, Dana Rubinstein, and Jeffery C. Mays, "U.S. Investigating Whether Adams Received Illegal Donations from Turkey," *The New York Times*, November 2, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/02/nyregion/eric-adams-brianna-suggs-fbi-raid.html>

³⁰ Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, "Turkish Foreign Policy after the Elections: A New Dawn, or More of the Same?" *The Loop*, May 12, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/turkish-foreign-policy-after-the-elections-a-new-dawn-or-more-of-the-same/>

coherent an organization is, the more highly institutionalized it is.”³¹ Here again, the United States and Turkey exhibit very different patterns of institutionalization. In the United States, as CIA Director William J. Burns has argued, “The style and substance of our polarized politics have infected American diplomacy. Policies lurch between parties, commitments expire at the end of each administration, institutions are politicized, and disagreements are tribal.”³² By contrast, in Turkey, although the bureaucracy beneath the presidency may have its own ideological divisions, Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm finds that since 2011, the clique of ruling elites within Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs have largely been “subordinate to political elites.”³³ What is more, as Gülen observes, since the first direct election of Turkey’s president in 2014, the presidential office has emerged as “the omnipotent decision-maker, while other state departments... simply carried out the orders.”³⁴

Why do the U.S. and Turkey suffer from different varieties of deinstitutionalization? In the following analysis, I illustrate that whereas the United States suffers primarily from partisan polarization over foreign policy, especially since the 2016 presidential election, what ails Turkey is personalization of power.

2.2. U.S. foreign policy: Deinstitutionalization through polarization

Rising partisan polarization is perhaps the main driving force behind the deinstitutionalization of U.S. foreign policy. Precisely because certain foreign policy decisions, such as supplying military aid or weaponry to foreign nations, are subject to approval by the U.S. Congress, partisan divisions have eroded congressional unity on foreign policy issues. As just one recent example, in November 2023, partisan acrimony was on full display in Congress, as House Republicans only voted to support a stopgap spending bill after roughly \$6 billion in aid for Ukraine was dropped from the legislation.³⁵ In the context of U.S.-Turkey relations specifically, polarization has resulted in partisan flip-flops across a variety of issue areas. The following analysis identifies two case studies in which U.S. polarization contributed to policy reversals: U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and U.S. support for human rights in Turkey. U.S. polarization over foreign policy was not the sole driver of these reversals, as Turkish foreign policy priorities were also evolving, but was nonetheless a significant cause.

As a first example, U.S. partisan polarization and the isolationist turn of the Republican party contributed to a major policy reversal on U.S. support for Kurdish partners in the SDF. For five years, starting under President Barack Obama in 2014, the United States engaged in close counter-terrorism cooperation with the SDF as part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL.³⁶ Yet in October 2019, after a phone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Donald Trump gave a green light to Turkey’s occupation of northern Syria,

³¹ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 22.

³² William J. Burns, “Polarized Politics Has Infected American Diplomacy,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2020, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/polarized-politics-has-infected-american-diplomacy/612778/>

³³ Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, “The Sociology of Diplomats,” 558-573.

³⁴ Gülen, “Turf Wars in Foreign Policy Bureaucracy,” 4.

³⁵ Jeff Stein, John Hudson, Paul Kane, and Jacob Bogage, “Alarm Grows in Kyiv, Washington as GOP House Blocks Ukraine Aid,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2023, November, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/09/30/ukraine-aid-government-shutdown/>

³⁶ Robin Wright, “Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump’s Abandonment of Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker*, October 20, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/10/28/turkey-syria-the-kurds-and-trumps-abandonment-of-foreign-policy>

effectively “abandoning” the SDF.³⁷ Specifically, Trump ordered the abrupt withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. Special Forces stationed in SDF-held areas—a policy that led Kurdish forces to turn to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as well as Russian troops, for military help.³⁸ This dramatic policy reversal raised serious questions about America’s trustworthiness and showed U.S. allies that even established military cooperation could fall victim to America’s domestic political divisions.

A further example of policy reversals in U.S.-Turkey relations concerns U.S. support for human rights in Turkey. As Carothers and Press note in their review of the “democracy-security dilemma” in U.S. foreign policy, the Trump administration “exerted no systematic criticism or pressure on Turkey” regarding democracy and human rights issues.³⁹ Perhaps the only major exception to this policy was U.S. engagement in the case of Andrew Brunson, an American evangelical pastor arrested in Turkey. Urged on by evangelical voters in the United States, Trump’s administration went to great lengths to secure Brunson’s release, including by applying Global Magnitsky Act sanctions on Turkey’s interior and justice ministers in 2018.⁴⁰ Overall, however, Trump’s administration was indifferent to Turkey’s domestic politics.

In sharp contrast, the Biden administration has taken “a markedly different tone on democracy and rights” in Turkey.⁴¹ In an interview with editors from the *New York Times* while on the campaign trail, Joe Biden went so far as to call President Erdoğan an “autocrat” and state that Washington should make clear “that we support opposition leadership.”⁴² Once in office, Biden’s first call to President Erdoğan was to notify Turkey that the United States would officially recognize the Armenian genocide.⁴³ At two Summits for Democracy, held in December 2021 and March 2023, Biden’s administration declined to invite Turkey, as well as another NATO ally, Hungary.⁴⁴

Policy flip-flops on the Syrian Kurds and human rights may be the most visible manifestations of how polarization has resulted in a deinstitutionalization of U.S. foreign policy. Yet a second form of deinstitutionalization is less obvious. In a polarized, gridlocked Washington, individual policymakers exert disproportionate influence on foreign policy, often by exerting a veto over congressional legislation.

The criminal allegations against former Senator Bob Menendez vividly illustrate that in a gridlocked Congress, individual politicians may decisively shape U.S. foreign policy. For years, Menendez served as perhaps the “most vocal” critic of Turkey in Washington and played a key role in blocking the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Ankara.⁴⁵ Yet in October 2023,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, “Navigating the Democracy-Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy: Lessons from Egypt, India, and Turkey,” *Carnegie Endowment*, November 4, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/04/navigating-democracy-security-dilemma-in-u.s.-foreign-policy-lessons-from-egypt-india-and-turkey-pub-85701>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jonathan Spicer, “Turkey Slams Biden’s Past Call for U.S. to Back Erdogan Opponents,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2020, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-biden-turkey-idUSKCN25B0XS>.

⁴³ Carothers and Press, “Navigating the Democracy-Security Dilemma in U.S. Foreign Policy,” 14.

⁴⁴ Kemal Kirişci, “Biden’s Exclusion of Erdoğan from the Democracy Summit May Be a Blessing in Disguise for Turkey,” *Just Security*, December 8, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.justsecurity.org/79477/bidens-exclusion-of-erdogan-from-the-democracy-summit-may-be-a-blessing-in-disguise-for-turkey/>; Elizabeth Hagedorn, “Turkey Left off Guest List for Biden’s 2nd Democracy Summit,” *Al-Monitor*, March 24, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/turkey-left-guest-list-bidens-2nd-democracy-summit>

⁴⁵ Joe Gould and Connor O’Brien, “Menendez Ouster Improves Odds for F-16 Sale to Turkey, Top Republican Says,” *Politico*, September 27, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/09/27/menendez-turkey-erdogan>

federal prosecutors charged then-Senator Menendez with conspiring to act as an agent of Egypt at the same time that the senator served as chairman of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁴⁶ With Menendez stepping down from his post as committee chairman, odds of a deal to sell F-16s to Turkey have significantly improved, according to House Foreign Affairs Chair Mike McCaul.⁴⁷ Indeed, as President Erdoğan remarked to journalists, “One of our most important problems regarding the F-16s were the activities of U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez against our country.”⁴⁸ As the Menendez saga shows, Washington today is experiencing such significant gridlock that a single senator can decisively influence foreign policy by imposing a veto on foreign policy issues.

2.3. Turkish foreign policy: Deinstitutionalization through personalization

While Turkey also suffers from severe partisan polarization,⁴⁹ the primary driver of deinstitutionalization in Turkish foreign policy has not been polarization but the personalization of power under President Erdoğan. This personalization of Turkish foreign policy has three primary manifestations.

First, as Aydın-Düzgüt et al. observe, Erdoğan as head of state is “not constrained by bureaucratic institutions or public debate;” rather, he is “almost entire free to make or reverse policies” as he sees fit.⁵⁰ Especially since the 2017 constitutional referendum, in which Turkey adopted an executive presidential system, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has lost significant status as an influential actor shaping external relations. As Kirişçi and Toygür note from an interview with a serving Turkish diplomat, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs “has become ‘completely excluded’ from foreign policymaking and was in a ‘state of paralysis.’”⁵¹ Erdoğan’s decision to acquire the Russian S-400 missile defense system in July 2019—which resulted in Turkey’s removal from the F-35 program—illustrates how personalized decisions may inflict long-term strain on institutional cooperation.⁵²

Of equal importance, Turkey’s foreign policy apparatus largely elevates those loyal to Erdoğan. As Kirişçi and Toygür observe, under Turkey’s hyper-presidential system, the “most striking characteristic of this restructured state is that [Erdoğan’s] ministers and those serving under them are handpicked for loyalty.”⁵³ The minister of foreign affairs whom Erdoğan appointed after the May 2023 elections, Hakan Fidan, is a case in point. Fidan is a long-time confidant of Erdoğan: From 2010 to 2023, with only a one-month interruption around the May 2015 elections, Fidan served as director of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MİT). Alongside current MİT director İbrahim Kalin, Fidan stands out as one of relatively few officials who have remained in Erdoğan’s inner circle for over a decade.

republican-defense-00118421.

⁴⁶ Weiser, Fandos, and Rashbaum, “Menendez and Wife Face Charges of Plotting to Make Him a Foreign Agent.”

⁴⁷ Gould and O’Brien, “Menendez Ouster Improves Odds for F-16 Sale to Turkey, Top Republican Says.”

⁴⁸ Andrew Wilks, “Erdoğan Says Menendez Resignation from Senate Committee Boosts Turkey’s Bid to Acquire F-16s,” *AP News*, September 26, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/erdogan-menendez-f16-azerbaijan-sweden-nato-netanyahu-cyprus-f4df7341a85f0362107648615015a8b1>.

⁴⁹ Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, “The Islamist-Secularist Divide and Turkey’s Descent into Severe Polarization,” in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, eds. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 17–37.

⁵⁰ Aydın-Düzgüt, Balta, and O’Donohue, “Turkey, Russia, and the West.”

⁵¹ Kirişçi and Toygür, “Turkey’s New Presidential System,” 6.

⁵² Jim Garamone, “U.S. Begins Process of ‘Unwinding’ Turkey From F-35 Program, DOD Officials Say,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, July 17, 2019, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1908351/us-begins-process-of-unwinding-turkey-from-f-35-program-dod-officials-say/>

⁵³ Kirişçi and Toygür, “Turkey’s New Presidential System,” 6.

Finally, and perhaps most intangibly, Turkey's foreign policy interests are increasingly identified with its leader's political fortunes. As Aydın-Düzgüt et al. observe, Turkey's foreign policy has "blurred the lines between the public interest and partisan (or simply personal) interest, defined in terms of regime security."⁵⁴ Changes in Turkey's external relations after the May 2023 elections illustrate that domestic political calculations often undergird Turkey's foreign policy. Now that Erdoğan has secured reelection for another five years as president, he has submitted Sweden's NATO bid to Turkey's parliament and sought to court foreign direct investment by supporting a more orthodox monetary policy and appointing economic policy officials such as finance minister Mehmet Şimşek.⁵⁵

3. Theorizing Societal Ties as an "Anchor" in U.S.-Turkey Relations: Why Societal Linkages Are Enduring but Politically Marginal

At a time when U.S.-Turkey relations have proven volatile and foreign policymaking has become deinstitutionalized, can societal ties enable the two nations to engage in constructive dialogue and make progress on core bilateral issues? For instance, can cooperation between U.S. and Turkish civil society improve mutual understanding and even generate progress on human rights issues? Can U.S. and Turkish universities offer sites for developing foreign policy dialogue?

By analyzing U.S.-Turkey societal ties in two key areas—civil society and media, as well as higher education—this paper argues that societal ties are uniquely institutionalized and enduring. Yet a close analysis suggests that these societal ties are politically marginal and often disconnected from policy processes. Indeed, as I suggest using data on Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities, the fact that societal ties are politically disconnected may be precisely what allows these ties to endure, and university programs that depend on funding from the U.S. and Turkish national governments have faced instability.

Ultimately, then, this paper theorizes that societal linkages should be conceptualized not as *agents* directly shaping foreign policy but as *anchors* that set boundaries on how far apart the United States and Turkey can drift. Anchors do not push ships in a particular direction, nor do they hold ships in exactly one spot. Rather, anchors allow ships to move in response to the currents, but within a defined radius. In the same way, societal linkages between the United States and Turkey function as anchors by creating lasting ties that bind the two nations together and increase the costs of a rupture in relations even as the relationship faces turbulence in other areas.

4. Civil Society and Media as a Societal Linkage

U.S. ties with Turkey's embattled but robust civil society and independent media organizations remain a bright spot in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. Numerous INGOs, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, have been actively operating in Turkey for decades and provide a stable connection with U.S. and international civil society. U.S.-based grant-makers, such as the Chrest Foundation, have also built sustained, decades-long ties with various Turkish NGOs.

⁵⁴ Aydın-Düzgüt, Balta, and O'Donohue, "Turkey, Russia, and the West," 7.

⁵⁵ Keith Fray and Adam Samson, "Has Erdoğan Really Embraced Economic Orthodoxy in Turkey?" *Financial Times*, October 9, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/69a30398-4fd6-4e94-a111-435cc01c3386>; Adam Samson and Richard Milne, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Submits Sweden's Nato Bid to Turkey's Parliament," *Financial Times*, October 23, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/c261c0f7-7c94-42d0-8508-45f9fd621762>

Yet it is crucial to recognize that these civil society groups have limited influence over public policy. As Turkey's institutions have become increasingly personalistic, INGO representatives, especially those working in the field of human rights, have become more disconnected from Turkish public officials. The online media organizations that receive U.S. grants are limited in their ability to reach the Turkish public.⁵⁶

4.1. Turkey's robust civil society: The role of INGOs

INGOs that link Turkey's civil society to international communities have proven remarkably robust under political pressure. INGOs such as Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters without Borders have all become institutionalized over the course of decades.

Amnesty International has been operating in Turkey for over two decades, with the organization's Turkey branch receiving approval to open in 2001.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that the former head of Amnesty's Turkey branch, Taner Kılıç, was arrested in 2017 and held in prison for 14 months, the organization continues to conduct significant work.⁵⁸ A model of Turkey's robust civil society, Amnesty's Turkey branch has modest but significant resources, with total revenue of 12.9 million Turkish Lira in 2021.⁵⁹

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has been conducting work in Turkey since the 1990s—a further example of how institutionalized many INGOs are in Turkey.⁶⁰ The CPJ has a representative based in Turkey and currently holds meetings each year with Turkey's Constitutional Court, alongside other press freedom organizations such as the International Press Institute and Reporters without Borders.⁶¹ The CPJ has been organizing high-level meetings with Turkish government officials since at least 1997, when the CPJ and other local and international press freedom organizations met with then-Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz.⁶²

A third exemplar of Turkey's deeply rooted civil society is Reporters without Borders (RSF). RSF has published detailed, consistent coverage of media freedom in Turkey since at least 2002.⁶³ RSF has maintained this work despite the fact that its Turkey representative, journalist Erol Önderoğlu, was arrested in June 2016 and faced up to 14 years in prison for his work with the shuttered newspaper *Özgür Gündem* [*Free Agenda*].⁶⁴ Indeed, RSF has

⁵⁶ Andrew O'Donohue, Max Hoffman, and Alan Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape," *Center for American Progress*, June 10, 2020, accessed date November, 2023. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/06/09110232/06-20_TurkeysChangingMediaLandscape.pdf.

⁵⁷ Necmi Ulus, "Amnesty International Turkey and Its Enterprise," *Amnesty International*, June 28, 2022, accessed date November, 2023, 4. <https://shorturl.at/nTzN1>

⁵⁸ Hamdi Fırat Büyük, "European Court: Turkey Broke Law by Arresting Amnesty Campaigner," *Balkan Insight*, May 31, 2022, accessed date November, 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/31/european-court-turkey-broke-law-by-arresting-amnesty-campaigner/>.

⁵⁹ Ulus, "Amnesty International Turkey and Its Enterprise," 9.

⁶⁰ "Turkey: Criminal Prosecutions of Journalists," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, July, 1999, accessed date November, 2023. <https://cpj.org/reports/1999/05/turkeyreport/>

⁶¹ "Turkey: International Delegation Condemns Passage of Disinformation Law and Issues Call to Protect Safety and Freedom of Journalists Ahead of 2023 Elections," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, October 14, 2022, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/turkey-international-delegation-condemns-passage-disinformation-law-and-issues-call-protect-safety>

⁶² "Turkey: Criminal Prosecutions of Journalists."

⁶³ "Bill for Tightening the Legislation on Violation of the Press Laws," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, February 6, 2002, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/bill-tightening-legislation-violation-press-laws>; "RSF Urges Turkey to Respect Press Freedom in Wake of Exhibition Protests," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, May 10, 2002, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-urges-turkey-respect-press-freedom-wake-exhibition-protests>; "RSF Chief Banned from Turkey," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, May 15, 2002, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-chief-banned-turkey>

⁶⁴ "Joint Statement in Support of Erol Önderoğlu, facing 14 Years in Prison," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, February 2, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/joint-statement-support-erol-%C3%B6ndero%C4%9Flu-facing-14-years-prison>

been most active in publishing news posts when press freedom has been most threatened. Looking at RSF's record of online news posts since 2002, the organization published the most in 2016, 2017, and 2018—three years when journalists' rights were under acute stress.⁶⁵ RSF, along with Amnesty International and the CPJ, is a testament to the deep roots of many INGOs in Turkey's civil society.

4.2. The U.S. connection: Philanthropic and government support

While INGOs provide one enduring societal linkage between Turkish and international civil society, U.S. grant-making organizations, both private and public, provide another sustained connection. Particularly noteworthy is the Chrest Foundation—a private, family foundation based in Irving, Texas—which has offered grants to support civil society in Turkey for more than two decades since 2001.⁶⁶ In 2022, the Chrest Foundation gave a total of \$697,582 in grants to nine Turkish civil society organizations.⁶⁷ These grants provided support to independent media outlets, such as *Gazete Duvar*, *Medyascope*, and *Serbestiyet*, as well as civil society organizations, such as the Memory Center (*Hafıza Merkezi*), the Hrant Dink Foundation, and the Platform for Independent Journalism (P24).

Among civil society funders, the Chrest Foundation stands out for its sustained work building relationships with Turkish civil society organizations, sometimes for more than a decade. For example, from 2008 to 2023, the Chrest Foundation provided the Hrant Dink Foundation with 21 grants—one or more in every year except 2020.⁶⁸ *Anadolu Kültür*, a non-profit cultural institution, was awarded 23 grants between 2005 and 2020.⁶⁹ The non-profit Memory Center received 11 grants from the Chrest Foundation between 2012 and 2022.⁷⁰ Another 10 grants supported Sabancı University's Gender and Women's Studies Center (SÜ Gender) from 2009 to 2020.⁷¹

The Chrest Foundation is but one prominent example of U.S. philanthropic and governmental support for civil society in Turkey. Since 2000, the U.S.-based non-profit Ashoka has invested in the non-profit work of 30 social entrepreneurship fellows in Turkey, including the founders of KAMER, a women's human rights organization, and Teyit, a digital fact-checking platform.⁷² On the side of U.S. governmental support, the U.S. Embassy in Turkey, the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) have acted as grant-makers and built ties with Turkish civil society.

4.3. The disconnect between Turkey's civil society and public policy

Turkey's civil society organizations serve numerous invaluable functions, yet it is important to recognize—as civil society organization leaders do themselves—that these groups typically have very limited connections to policymakers within Turkey's national

⁶⁵ RSF published 41 news posts in 2016, 53 news posts in 2017, and 53 news posts in 2018. See, "Türkiye | RSF," *Reporters without Borders (RSF)*, November 3, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. <https://rsf.org/en/country-%C3%BCrkiye>

⁶⁶ "About Us: History of the Chrest Foundation," *Chrest Foundation*, accessed November, 2023. <https://chrestfoundation.org/about-us/>

⁶⁷ "Grants Awarded," *Chrest Foundation*, accessed November, 2023. <https://chrestfoundation.org/grants-awarded/>

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² "Sosyal Girişimciler [Social Entrepreneurs]," *Ashoka Türkiye*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://ashokaturkiye.org/sosyal-girisimciler/>

government. Turkey's government also wields significant power to restrict the work of media and civil society organizations when it so chooses: In 2022, for instance, Turkey banned access to two international public broadcasters, Deutsche Welle and Voice of America.⁷³ Thus, although U.S.-Turkey linkages in the domain of civil society provide a crucial anchor for the bilateral relationship and basic freedoms in Turkey, they usually lack influence over foreign or domestic policy.

The example of media freedom organizations demonstrates how Turkey's deinstitutionalization has undercut the influence of civil society organizations. As noted previously, media freedom organizations have a long tradition of meeting with high-ranking Turkish policymakers, dating back to at least the 1990s.⁷⁴ As one civil society representative mentioned in an interview, press freedom organizations even met in 2014 with President Erdoğan and then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.⁷⁵ As late as 2016, this civil society representative reported having the cellphone numbers of secretaries within the Ministry of Justice. "I could at least call, and they would answer, even if the response was 'no comment,'" this representative observed.⁷⁶ "Now," this representative commented, "I don't know anyone in Ankara."⁷⁷

Unfortunately, in Turkey's media landscape today, the online media outlets supported by U.S. civil society funders also tend to lack influence. For example, the online media outlets funded by the Chrest Foundation typically lack a large audience base. On Twitter, as of November 2023, *Gazete Duvar* had 827,500 followers, followed by *Medyascope* with 310,200 and *Sebestiyet* with 65,800.⁷⁸ By contrast, for example, pro-government outlet *AHaber* had 2.1 million followers on Twitter, more than all three outlets combined.⁷⁹ What is more, according to nationally representative polling conducted in 2018, approximately 72 percent of citizens in Turkey report that their primary news source is television, as compared to 19 percent who say they primarily get their news from social media or online news outlets.⁸⁰ Thus, it is important to note that while these online outlets provide important pluralism in Turkey's media landscape, they are influential among about a fifth of Turkey's population, especially younger, pro-opposition citizens who are more likely to report consuming online news.⁸¹

5. Bilateral Ties in Higher Education: The Tradeoff between Stability and Political Connections

To what extent can U.S. and Turkish universities play a role in strengthening bilateral relations, advancing dialogue on key challenges in U.S.-Turkey relations, and informing public policy processes? Through an analysis of ties between the U.S. and Turkey in higher education, I find that educational linkages face a tradeoff between stability and political

⁷³ Laura Pitel, "Turkey Bans Access to US and German Public Broadcasters," *Financial Times*, July 1, 2022, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/49b4e348-304b-453c-9a65-48ee3e155109>

⁷⁴ "Turkey: Criminal Prosecutions of Journalists."

⁷⁵ Author's interview with Turkish civil society representative, October 2023. See, O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy."

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ These data were collected on November, 2023 from the following Twitter pages: "duvaR (@gazeteduvar)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/gazeteduvar>; "Medyascope (@medyascope)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/medyascope>; "Serbestiyet (@serbestiyetweb)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/serbestiyetweb>

⁷⁹ "A Haber (@ahaber)," *X*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://x.com/ahaber>

⁸⁰ O'Donohue, Hoffman, and Makovsky, "Turkey's Changing Media Landscape."

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

connection: Cooperation in higher education has been a laudably stable area of bilateral cooperation, precisely because these ties are largely though incompletely insulated from the political priorities of national governments. By compiling a dataset of 12 existing or defunct Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities, as well as corresponding with nine leaders of Turkish studies programs, I show that the primary strength of these programs is their distance from politics, given their focus on the humanities and access to non-governmental funding. Yet this strength also entails a tradeoff in policy influence, as these Turkish studies centers are largely disconnected from foreign policy research and practice.

5.1. Why educational ties are especially stable and institutionalized

In U.S.-Turkey relations, educational ties have proven uniquely stable, as compared to the volatility over political issues. Remarkably, the Turkish Fulbright Commission—created through a binational agreement in 1949—predates Turkey’s accession to NATO in 1952.⁸² The Turkish Fulbright Commission has run without interruption since 1950, building bilateral ties through a unique network of more than 5,000 alumni.⁸³ The American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) is another prominent example of how educational cooperation has become deeply institutionalized. Since its foundation in 1964, ARIT has supported more than 700 U.S. students studying advanced Turkish, more than 550 Turkish scholars conducting research inside and outside Turkey, and more than 125 Greek and Turkish scholars who have conducted research in each other’s countries as Aegean Exchange fellows.⁸⁴

At a time when inter-governmental cooperation is often challenging, public universities have been key agents in building and sustaining U.S.-Turkey connections. Since 2000, the State University of New York (SUNY) and the Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) have maintained a dual diploma program that has developed ties between eleven SUNY institutions and seven Turkish universities.⁸⁵ Through this program, more than 2,200 graduates have earned dual diplomas by spending half of their education at a SUNY campus and half at a Turkish university.⁸⁶

In the United States, Turkish studies has also developed as an academic field.⁸⁷ Reed documents that although “there was no systematic focus on Turkish studies in North American universities” until 1945, after World War II Turkish studies began to grow substantially, incubated in particular at the newly established Near East Studies Program at Princeton University.⁸⁸ Following the creation of the first academic center for Turkish studies at Princeton were centers at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, Indiana University, and Harvard University.⁸⁹ As Lockman shows in his remarkable portrait of the evolution of Middle East Studies in the United States, this emerging field received foundational support from the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations,⁹⁰ and the growth of the field after World War II was closely tethered to the perceived need for “military and

⁸² “Mutual Memory,” *Turkish Fulbright Commission*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://70th.fulbright.org.tr/?lang=en>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “History,” *American Research Institute in Turkey*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://aritweb.org/home/about/history/>

⁸⁵ “Turkey – SUNY,” *State University of New York*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://system.suny.edu/global/turkey/>

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Howard A. Reed, “Perspectives on the Evolution of Turkish Studies in North America since 1946,” *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (1997): 15–31.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁰ Lockman, *Field Notes*, 1–3.

naval officers familiar with...actual and potential combat zones.”⁹¹

Today, Turkish studies has emerged as a small but institutionalized field, with its professional association, the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association (OTSA), founded in 1971.⁹² Today, according to the American Association of Teachers of Turkic Languages, Turkish language classes are taught at 45 colleges and universities across the United States.⁹³ Among these 45 U.S. institutions, a particularly noteworthy development is that as of 2023, at least 12 programs, initiatives, and centers have formed with a dedicated focus on Turkish studies.⁹⁴ These programs go beyond Turkish language instruction by offering additional courses on Turkey's culture, history, literature, and politics.⁹⁵ The table below lists 10 existing Turkish studies programs, initiatives, and centers in the United States, as well as two defunct programs, along with information about their dates of operation, leadership, and funding sources. These Turkish studies centers serve an invaluable educational function by enabling students and faculty to gain a deeper, humanistic understanding of Turkey that extends beyond news headlines.

Precisely because these programs often receive private or university funding, many have the resources to operate over a long-time horizon and are thus partially insulated from the political turbulence of U.S.-Turkey relations. For example, at the University of Washington, the Turkish and Ottoman Studies Program has been running for 55 years since its foundation in 1968 by the late Professor Walter Andrews.⁹⁶ At Columbia University, the Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies was founded in 2016 with a \$10 million endowment from the Sabancı family that aims to allow the center to operate in perpetuity.⁹⁷ Reliance on funding from universities or from private donors does not mean that Turkish studies centers are immune from political pressures, as discussed below. However, the data in the table below strongly suggest that the programs with university or private funding are more likely to survive amid a turbulent bilateral relationship.

5.2. Why educational ties are politically disconnected: Funding and personnel

While these educational ties are uniquely enduring, they are stable perhaps precisely because they are largely disconnected from contemporary politics and foreign policy. In effect, there is a clear division of labor in the United States between Turkish studies programs and think tanks, in which the former largely do not engage with current issues in U.S.-Turkey relations. There are two main reasons for this disconnect from foreign policymaking: funding and personnel.

Funding is the first key reason why Turkish studies programs typically do not have strong connections to foreign policymaking. When Turkish studies programs have been connected

⁹¹ Ibid., 20.

⁹² OTSA was originally founded in 1971 as the Turkish Studies Association (TSA). See, Reed, “Perspectives on the Evolution,” 27–28.

⁹³ “Programs In North America,” *American Association of Teachers of Turkic Languages*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://www.aatturkic.org/na-programs>

⁹⁴ Although the now-defunct Institute of Turkish Studies (ITS) was primarily a grant-making institution, rather than an academic curricular program, I include it in the table for the sake of completeness. For a preliminary list of institutions, on which the list in this paper is based, see Bahar Otcu-Grillman, “Turkish Language Teaching in the US: Challenges, Opportunities, Sense of Belonging and Identities,” *Billig*, no. 70 (2014): 211–236.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Turkish and Ottoman Studies Program,” *University of Washington – Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures*, accessed date November, 2024. <https://melc.washington.edu/programs/turkish>

⁹⁷ “About | Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies,” *Sakıp Sabancı Center for Turkish Studies*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://sakipsabancicenter.columbia.edu/content/about>

to foreign policy through funding from the U.S. or Turkish national governments, they have been more vulnerable to disruption. To begin with U.S. governmental funding, U.S. universities are eligible to apply for support from the U.S. Department of Education under Title VI when they offer courses in four major Middle Eastern languages.⁹⁸ However, Title VI places departments under onerous reporting requirements, as all events related to Middle East programming must be published and reported to Congress.⁹⁹ Members of Congress or their staff can then investigate the topics of events.¹⁰⁰ Funding from the U.S. Department of Defense can also be vulnerable to disruption. Although the Department of Defense provided funds to establish a Turkish Flagship Program at Indiana University in 2011, this program concluded in June 2020.¹⁰¹

The closure of the Institute of Turkish Studies (ITS) in 2020 further illustrates the precarity of relying on government funding. For over 30 years since its founding in 1982, the ITS was the only U.S.-based non-profit dedicated to supporting Turkish studies in higher education and awarded grants to more than 400 scholars in the field.¹⁰² Crucially, the Turkish government provided foundational support for the ITS through a grant of \$3 million created in 1982.¹⁰³ When the Turkish government decided to defund the ITS in 2015, the institution proved unable to sustain itself through its own fundraising efforts.¹⁰⁴ A major point of contention, reportedly, was that representatives from the Turkish Embassy in Washington sought to steer the subject matter and tone of academic research in a direction that would reflect positively on Turkey.¹⁰⁵

While private donors to Turkish studies initiatives may offer a more stable source of funding, these donors, especially those in Turkey, may have incentives to ensure that Turkish studies programs do not broach politically sensitive topics in Turkish domestic politics or foreign policy. In particular, the private donors who fund Turkish studies programs may wish to steer the activities of these initiatives away from politically charged issues, such as democracy, human rights, or the Kurdish issue. For families in Turkey who have the resources to support Turkish studies in the United States, events that engage with contemporary Turkish politics may raise a political and reputational risk.

Another challenge for Turkish studies centers is the money they must be careful not to take. As one Turkish studies center leader noted, universities are “working hard *not* to take certain dollars from rich Turkish people,” especially those affiliated with the Gülen movement, known officially in Turkey as the Fetullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETÖ).¹⁰⁶ In effect, even when drawing upon private donations, university leaders often feel they must be careful to avoid receiving donations that could draw them into a heated political conflict.

A second reason for the disconnect with politics is personnel. The leaders and activities of existing Turkish studies programs in the United States are predominantly focused on a

⁹⁸ Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O’Donohue, “Law versus Democracy.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “IU Bloomington Chosen to Establish Nation’s First Turkish Flagship Program,” *University of Indiana Bloomington News Room*, October 6, 2011, accessed date November, 2023. <https://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/19849.html>; “Status on the Turkish Flagship,” *The Language Flagships*, accessed date November, 2023. <https://flagship.indiana.edu/turkish-flagship.html>

¹⁰² Liam Scott, “Institute of Turkish Studies Caught in Turkey’s Crackdown on Academic Freedom,” *The Hoya*, October 7, 2021, accessed date November, 2023. <https://thehoya.com/institute-turkish-studies-caught-turkey-crackdown-academic-freedom/>

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O’Donohue, “Law versus Democracy.”

humanistic understanding of Turkey, rather than on today's politics and policymaking. Of the ten existing programs in Turkish studies, only one, at Portland State University, was run by a political scientist, as of December 2023, as shown in the table above. Much more commonly, Turkish studies programs are led by historians (at Columbia, Northwestern, New York University, and the University of Washington), anthropologists (at Georgetown and the University of Arizona), or scholars of Turkish language and literature (at the University of Chicago and University of Texas at Austin).

The predominant training of Turkish studies leaders in the humanities likely predisposes the field to err on the side of stability and non-political engagement, rather than involving itself in foreign policy issues. To be sure, several scholars from the humanities, such as Eissenstat and Reynolds, publish research and engage in discussions on contemporary foreign policy.¹⁰⁷ However, in general, Turkish studies programs often do not produce foreign policy research or engage with policymakers on contemporary U.S.-Turkey relations. The exception to this rule, which suggests the influence of a Turkish studies program's leader, is the Center for Turkish Studies at Portland State University. The center—the only one run by a political scientist—published an occasional paper series on contemporary policy issues.

Troublingly, scholars who teach Turkish language courses also tend to be among the more precarious and vulnerable workers in academia. Even at well-resourced, private universities, Turkish-language teachers are not tenure-track faculty, despite often holding a Ph.D., but rather adjunct or non-tenure-track instructors.¹⁰⁸ Consistent with research on gender and ethnic disparities in U.S. academic positions,¹⁰⁹ Turkish-language instructors, who usually lack the status and protections of tenure-track faculty, are overwhelmingly female and non-native speakers of English.¹¹⁰ The professional precarity of Turkish-language instructors may be a further reason why university personnel have strong incentives to maintain a safe distance from contemporary politics.

6. Conclusion: Societal Ties as an Anchor of U.S.-Turkey Relations

By disaggregating U.S.-Turkey relations into their political and societal dimensions, this paper presents a more complex picture of the bilateral relationship. In particular, I add nuance to the prevailing pessimism in U.S.-Turkey relations by identifying bright spots in the domain of societal relations. Of equal importance, I push back against the temptation to assign blame to either side by showing that both countries have experienced a deinstitutionalization of foreign policy—and thus that both bear some responsibility for volatile relations.

Overall, this paper advances two inter-related arguments. Drawing on Huntington's definition of "institutionalization," this article suggests that both U.S. and Turkish foreign policy have deinstitutionalized—but in different ways and for different reasons. In the United States, the foreign policy process is fraught with partisan disunity and offers disproportionate influence to particular individuals. At the root of this deinstitutionalization is profound and rising partisan polarization over foreign policy in the United States.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, in Turkey,

¹⁰⁷ Eissenstat, "After the Honeymoon;" Reynolds, "From Contentious yet Robust to Fraying and Fading."

¹⁰⁸ Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy."

¹⁰⁹ Anaïs Llorens, et al., "Gender Bias in Academia: A Lifetime Problem That Needs Solutions," *Neuron* 109, no. 13 (2021): 2047–2074; Danielle J. Galvin, Susan C. Anderson, Chelsi J. Marolf, Nikole G. Schneider, and Andrea L. Liebl, "Comparative Analysis of Gender Disparity in Academic Positions Based on U.S. Region and STEM Discipline," *PLoS ONE* 19, no. 3 (2024): 1–14.

¹¹⁰ Author correspondence with a Turkish studies program leader. See, O'Donohue, "Law versus Democracy."

¹¹¹ On the consequences of rising U.S. polarization, see Carothers, "The Long Path of Polarization," 80–84; Thomas Carothers

foreign policy has become increasingly personalized, with power consolidating in the hands of a powerful leader atop a hyper-presidential system of governance.

At the same time that foreign policymaking has become deinstitutionalized, societal ties between the United States and Turkey remain enduring. INGOs and civil society grant-makers have built ties for decades between U.S. and Turkish civil society. U.S. universities are now home to at least ten designated Turkish studies programs—many of which have operated for more than a decade. These areas of interaction represent only a fraction of U.S.-Turkey societal linkages, which include people-to-people contacts through cultural exchanges, migration, tourism, investment, and trade.

Yet it is important to recognize that societal ties have limited sway over and connection to the foreign policymaking process. Turkish and international NGOs have limited connections to Turkey's public policy process. Turkish studies programs at U.S. universities often are focused on a humanistic understanding of Turkey and the Ottoman world, rather than on contemporary U.S.-Turkey relations. Thus, as this paper has argued, these societal linkages are best conceptualized not as agents with the power and autonomy to push the United States and Turkey closer together but as anchors that prevent the two nations from drifting further apart.

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