

The United States, the Defence of the Middle East and Türkiye: 1946-1952*

Muhammet Faruk Çakır**

Abstract

This study analyses the early years of cooperation between Türkiye and the United States (US) in the field of security and defence by utilising US government documents and the secondary sources that heavily depend on primary sources. It emphasizes the link between the elements of the strategic context in which the US developed its approach to the defence of the Middle East and the American interest in developing defence ties with Türkiye. The major outcomes of Turkish-American cooperation were American support for Türkiye against the Soviet Union in 1946, the provision of American military assistance in 1947, the modernization of the Turkish military, the construction of military bases on Turkish territory, American support for Turkish membership in NATO and Turkish willingness to conduct its relations with the Middle East in coordination with the West. This study reveals that those outcomes reflected for the most time American political and strategic preferences. For this reason, the typical characteristics of those relations between great powers and small states can be observed in Turkish-American security relations during their formative years.

Keywords: Strategy of Containment, Defence of the Middle East, Defence of Türkiye, American Military Assistance.

Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Orta Doğu'nun Savunulması ve Türkiye: 1946-1952

Öz

Bu çalışmada Türkiye ile Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) arasındaki güvenlik ve savunma ilişkilerinin ilk yılları analiz edilmektedir. Çalışmada, Amerikan hükümet belgeleri ve büyük ölçüde birincil kaynaklara dayanılarak yapılan ikincil çalışmalar kullanılmıştır. Bu çalışmada, ABD'nin Orta Doğu'nun savunmasına yönelik yaklaşımını geliştirdiği stratejik bağlamın unsurları ile ABD'nin Türkiye ile savunma bağlarını geliştirmek istemesi arasındaki bağlantıya vurgu yapılmaktadır. Türk-Amerikan iş birliğinin başlıca çıktıları arasında; 1946'da Sovyetler Birliği'ne karşı Amerika'nın desteği, 1947'de Amerikan askeri yardımı verilmesi, Türk ordusunun modernizasyonu, Türk topraklarında askeri üsler kurulması, Türkiye'nin NATO üyeliğine Amerikan desteği ve Türkiye'nin Ortadoğu ile ilişkilerini Batı ile koordineli olarak yürütmeyi kabul etmesi yer almıştır. Bu çalışma, bu çıktıların çoğu zaman Amerika'nın siyasi ve stratejik tercihlerini yansıttığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu nedenle, ilk gelişim yıllarında Türk-Amerikan güvenlik ilişkilerinin, büyük güçler ile küçük devletler arasındaki ilişkilerin tipik özelliklerini taşıdığını gözlemlemek mümkündür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çevreleme Stratejisi, Orta Doğu'nun Savunulması, Türkiye'nin Savunulması, Amerikan Askeri Yardımı.

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**Dr. | Faculty Member, Police Academy Institute of Security Studies
mfcakir111@yahoo.com.tr | ORCID: 0000-0002-0787-0047

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Introduction

At the end of World War II, the members of Grand Alliance, namely the United States of America (US), the United Kingdom (hereafter referred as Britain) and the Soviet Union, created a new international order which was centred around the United Nations (UN) system. However, it failed to prevent the development of Soviet-American rivalry which started just after the end of the war. The Soviet-American rivalry had turned in various stages into an all-out confrontation, known as the Cold War between 1945 (the Polish crisis) and 1950 (the outbreak of the Korean War). During the formative years of the Cold War, the US developed rather assertive defence and security policies aimed at checking the spread of Soviet influence in the Eurasian land-mass, called the “strategy of containment”.

The Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East witnessed some of the serious disagreements of the early Cold War years. The US renounced the delay in the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in northern Iran in March 1946 and the Soviet demands from Türkiye regarding the joint defence of the Turkish Straits in the summer of 1946. The two events marked the beginning of American involvement in the security and defence of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

On the whole, in the period from 1946 to 1952 the Truman administration in the US decided that the US had vital US interests in the Middle East and re-defined several times the scope of those interests. The policy papers towards the region repeatedly emphasised two basic American objectives: to guarantee as far as possible the western access to petroleum resources and air fields of the region, and the denial of the region and its resources to the Soviet Union in peace as well as in war time (for example see, United States Department of State [US DOS], 1977: 1660). Such a definition of American objectives illustrated that the US officials established a link between the defence of Middle East and those of Western Europe, the most important place to be protected on the Soviet periphery according to the strategy of containment.

The years between 1946 and 1952 witnessed a major shift in Turkish foreign and security policies from neutrality to membership in NATO, the politico-military alliance led by the US. One manifestation of the shift in Turkish foreign orientation was the rapid growth of Turkish-American political and security ties during this period. Such factors as the fear of communism and of Russia on the part of Turkish governments and the ideal of Turkish political elites to be part of Western civilisation as well as changes in global and

regional geopolitics may explain the rapid development of Turkish-American relations in the fields of security and defence.

This study aims to make a contribution to the explanation that is based on geopolitics by focusing on the relationship between American involvement in Middle Eastern defence and the defence of Türkiye. Given that the parameters of American involvement in Middle Eastern defence were set by the policy of containment, which was formulated in 1946-1947 and reviewed in 1950 by the American government, the subject-matter of this study will be analysed in two sections. The first section will deal with American assessment of the matters regarding defence of the Middle East and Türkiye before 1950 while the second section will cover 1950-1952 period.

American Involvement in the Defence of the Middle East and Türkiye: 1946-1949

American interest in Middle Eastern security and defence developed within the Cold War framework. The rise of the Cold War may be attributed to the fears developed by the US and the Soviet Union during World War II and measures taken by them to eliminate such fears. On the part of the US, Washington policy-makers, however their country emerged from the war as the most powerful state in the World, were concerned about the emergence of a hostile, probably totalitarian, power with the capability to inflict damage on the American mainland. This fear was aggravated by other such major problems as the political and economic weakness of Western Europe, the power vacuums left by the defeat of Germany and Japan, the presence of Soviet army in Eastern Europe, and the rise of revolutionary nationalism in the Third World. Given the uncertainties resulting from a devastating war, it was desirable, in American view, to seek protection through the creation of a system of overseas bases, the balance of power in Eurasia, and a global economy in the America's image and interests (an in-depth analysis of American conception of security is provided in Leffler, 1984). The Soviet Union, on the other hand, sought the establishment of friendly regimes on its periphery in order to overcome its fear of another invasion and demanded an equal share in shaping the post-war international system (Wohlfort, 1993: 102, 203). The conflicting interests of the two sides made it difficult to reach a settlement about the shape of post-war Europe, particularly on the status of Germany, at the Potsdam Conference of July 1945. In 1946 it became clear that solutions acceptable to both East and West were hard to find. Almost daily crises in Germany among the occupying powers, the disagreement over the international

control of atomic energy, tensions in the Middle East (Iranian and Turkish crises), the signs indicating that Moscow excluded itself from global economic system based on free trade (the rejection of membership in the World Bank and in the International Monetary Fund, and the announcement of a new plan designed to make the Soviet Union self-sufficient economically) were some of the developments that fed into the atmosphere of mutual distrust. In the following years Soviet-American rivalry, initially bearing the characteristics of a classical great power struggle, rapidly turned into an ideological, political, economic and cultural confrontation between the two opposing powers and their supporters which is known as the Cold War.

The basic American strategy for fighting the Cold War had been the policy of “containment”. It intended to check the expansion of the influence of the Soviet Union and that of communism outside the regions that Moscow had already controlled. Its ultimate objective was to force the Soviet Union to change its foreign policy. This was to be achieved in the long-term by using the capacities of the US and that of its allies. Major characteristics of the American Cold War strategy of containment from its inception to 1950 (i.e. in the period that is covered by this study) were as follows. First, it took into account the fact that the US was in a strong position vis-a-vis the Soviet Union economically and militarily. Its mainland was not devastated by the war. It produced nearly a half of the world’s industrial production. It established overseas bases system and acquired transit rights towards the end of the war. It continued to improve its air and naval forces. Most importantly it had the monopoly of atomic bomb (Leffler, 1984: 349-350). In short, it had the capacity to defend the American mainland and to resist against the domination of Eurasian landmass by a single power. On the other hand, the Soviet Union was recovering from its wartime loses, had limited air and naval capabilities and possessed no atomic weapons. For these reasons, American policy makers perceived that the US had enough power to deter Moscow from using arms to obtain its political objectives (Gaddis, 1987: 117).

Secondly, because deterrence was expected to work given the American strengths and Soviet weaknesses, the US had the opportunity to implement the containment strategy by using mainly political and economic means.¹ The use of military means in carrying out containment mostly related to improving nuclear weapons as means of deterrence and providing military assistance to allied states.

¹ Evidence points out that Truman administration was sensitive about harmful effects of excessive military spending on American economy and on American political institutions (Etzold and Gaddis, 1978: 209).

Lastly, the policy of containment supposed that economic, social and political problems in the areas along the periphery of the Soviet Union might be exploited by Moscow in order to expand its influence. Against such a risk, the American government took the decision to “cultivate situations of strength” (Leffler, 1992: 506). The industrial areas that were destroyed the most during the war (namely Western Europe, Britain and Japan) were regarded as the most important areas in this respect. Among them, special attention was paid to Europe because of its perceived vulnerability to Soviet pressure. The US engaged other areas along the periphery on the case by case basis. The Middle East was somewhat different.

As pointed out above, the US considered Middle East after the war as an area where it has vital interests. But the region was special in that, instead of committing themselves to the defence of the region, the Americans preferred to support Britain’s political and military presence there and directed their limited resources to Western Europe. Yet they thought that the post-war British weakness (demonstrated by economic crisis in Britain and the rising nationalism in the Middle East) would create power vacuum there and the Soviet Union, the historical rival of the British, would capitalise on this very weakness in order to expand its influence (Schnabel, 1979: 109-110; Leffler, 1992: 77-80). Therefore, the Americans took some responsibility in Middle Eastern defence in a selective way by developing security ties with countries like Türkiye, Iran and Greece. As far as Türkiye is concerned, Washington authorities interested in the denial of Turkish territory to the Soviets, the development of Turkish own capacities through American assistance, the use of Turkish territory and the construction of military bases on Turkish territory. In other words, what the US was doing in the period of 1946 and 1949 can be named as the creation of a situation of strength in Türkiye, which will be explained in the rest of this section.

The inclusion of Türkiye in American considerations about Middle Eastern defence began in 1946. The delay in American interest to Türkiye in the post-war era can be explained with Turkish neutrality during World War II. Ankara followed the policy of neutrality during the war while the Balkans and Aegean Sea were under German occupation. This happened despite Türkiye made an alliance with Britain and France in October 1939. Although it declared war on Germany and Japan in February 1945 in order to be eligible for a seat in the UN, Turkish neutrality was resented by especially Britain and the Soviet Union. For this reason, Ankara faced a diplomatic isolation by the Alliance powers at the end of the war and had to fend off the Soviet pressure on it in 1945 alone. Nevertheless, Turkish authorities did not give up asking

British support under the terms of 1939 treaty and American diplomatic support. As William Hale has pointed out (2015: 78-79), power configuration in the international system deprived Türkiye from the opportunity to obtain political, economic and military assistance from other sources.

By the time Moscow demanded in 1946 a ceding of certain territory in the east in addition to its earlier demand of joint defence of the Turkish Straits, Soviet-American rivalry became stronger enough to warrant American support for Turkish stance. In August 1946 not only did the US support Türkiye formally against Soviet demands about the Straits but also warned Moscow, through intelligence channels, that Washington would oppose to any possible Soviet aggression against Türkiye by all means at its disposal, including the use of force (Mark, 1997: 383). Before this warning was made, Washington had received numerous intelligence reports that the Soviets were preparing for the invasion of Turkish territory, though many times they included exaggerated information about the Soviet troop movements in the Balkans and Caucasus (Mark, 1997: 396, 402-405; Schnabel, 1979: 50). The crisis faded in October when Washington received reports that Moscow was not planning an invasion (Mark, 1997: 412).

The Americans established connection between the Soviet pressure on Türkiye and developments in Iran and Greece in the same year. They opposed strongly to the continuation of Soviet occupation in northern Iran in violation of the terms of a war-time agreement between Britain and the Soviet Union, leading to immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops. Thereafter, the US closely followed developments inside Iran and took measures, including military assistance in order to strengthen internal security forces. In 1946 the weak position of the Greek government in the civil war against the communists also alarmed Washington. In the fall of 1946, the mood in Washington was that Soviet Union was seeking to change regimes in those countries by political pressure and subversive tactics. Because it was considered that such an outcome would result in the disruption of oil flow to Western Europe and weaken the British position in Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the American authorities felt that the US should act. American response had been placing a naval task force permanently in the Mediterranean (later became the Sixth Fleet) and beginning to consider how to proceed with an aid programme for the three countries (Schnabel, 1979: 54-57).

The deteriorating situation in Greece and the British decision to relinquish its responsibility to help Greece and Türkiye in the early 1947 forced the American authorities to reach a quick decision. This time the Iranian case

was separated. For Greece and Türkiye, it was thought that the situation was alarming in both countries because the former faced the likelihood of a communist takeover while the latter faced the possibility of economic turmoil in the long term because of its excessive spending on defence. To avoid both possibilities, the American government, with the consent of the Congress, decided to extend military and economic assistance to Greece and Türkiye in March 1947, known as the “Truman Doctrine” (Kuniholm, 1980: 375, 383-410; Yılmaz, 2015: 122-123). At that time, Turkish need for American political and material support, though the former was much important for Ankara than the latter, enabled the American side to impose the conditions on how Türkiye could use the military assistance (Yılmaz, 2015: 123; Baba, 2020: 48-49).

The decision also marked the beginning of American efforts to build Turkish own defence capability through military aid, a new phase in American interest in Turkish security. The objectives of aid, as defined by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), were “to stiffen Turkey’s will and ability to resist Soviet threats and to improve its military capability to conduct a strong holding and delaying action in the event of a Soviet invasion” (Rearden, 1984: 164). Building Turkish capacity grew in importance in 1947 and 1948 as the value of the Middle East was defined in Washington increasingly in terms of the region’s contribution to the security and prosperity of Western Europe. Such an assessment took into account the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe, the growing strength of Soviet control over Eastern Europe, the slow progress of economic recovery in Western Europe, the growing power of indigenous communists in countries like France and Italy, and the weakening economic and political control of Europeans over their colonies (Leffler, 1985: 815). The State Department especially paid attention to the relationship between the continuity of the flow of cheap oil from the Middle East and economic and political stability in Western Europe. In this respect, the turmoil in the Middle East caused by the establishment of the state of Israel increased the concerns in Washington (US DOS, 1977: 58, 173; Cohen, 1997: 35-37).

Another reason that made the military assistance to Türkiye more significant was the establishment of a linkage in British and American governments’ contingency plans of late 1940s between Western ability to inflict harm on the Soviet Union and Turkish resistance to Soviet attacks. It was considered that the industrial and petroleum producing areas of Soviet Union (the Urals and Caucasus regions) were vulnerable to air attacks that could be launched from the British base complex around the Suez Canal in Egypt. This complex included, among other things, “supply depots, ammunition dumps, repair facilities, command and control facilities, and numerous airfields” (Leffler, 1992: 77). But

only a portion of the Urals and Caucasus regions was within the effective range of British bombers and American B-29 bombers if they operated from the Suez complex. Contingency plans of both states recognized that retarding Soviet advance towards Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East in the event of a war was of vital importance in terms of inflicting heavy damage on Soviet war-making capacity. It was considered that the longer the Soviet advance was slowed down, the longer the American bombers based in Egypt would be able to bomb Soviet targets. It was also considered that Türkiye might serve as a buffer because of its location on major air, land and sea routes from Soviet Union to the Suez base complex and Middle Eastern oil fields. In addition, Turkish government and people were seen as determined to resist to the Soviets. Finally, their existing ability to resist could be improved through American military assistance (Cohen, 1997: 19-20, 40, 51; Leffler, 1992: 238-239).

For the above-mentioned political and strategic concerns, the Americans, as part of their objective of limiting Soviet influence to expand in the periphery, provided military assistance to Iran, Greece and Türkiye. Compared to Turkish one, Iranian and Greek aid programs were inward-looking programs in the sense that their main focus was supporting the stability of political regimes (for Iran see Schnabel, 1979: 56-57; for Greece see, Rearden, 1984: 159). However, Turkish programme, in addition to regime stability, focused much more clearly than the others on developing Turkish military capacity to resist Soviet attacks in the event of a war.² This was to be achieved by some modernization of Turkish armed forces³ as well the construction of basic infrastructure (roads, harbours, airports and communication facilities) through American assistance (Leffler, 1992: 238-239).

By the end of 1948, the depth of Turkish-American defence cooperation aroused on the Turkish side the expectation that American assistance would eventually lead to a formal alliance. But on the American side it brought on the agenda the issues of constructing American military airfields on Turkish soil with a view to using them in the event of a war and stockpiling aviation fuel. These issues were debated by the National Security Council (NSC) in

2 This aspect of the aid programme was explained later in an American policy document towards Greece and Türkiye ("NSC 42/1", dated 22 March 1949) as follows: "Because Turkey is strategically more important than Greece and because the present situation in Greece is precarious, whereas in Turkey it is relatively sound, the United States has greater long-range strategic interests in the military establishments of Turkey than in those of Greece" (US DOS, 1977: 278).

3 The modernization of armed forces aimed at reducing "the size of the Turkish armed forces while increasing their firepower, mobility, and overall effectiveness through the modernization of weapons and the development of an air force." Another objective of modernization in the eyes of American authorities was a general reorganization of Turkish military establishment on American model (Rearden, 1984: 165-166).

April 1949. In the debate, Secretary of State Dean Acheson pointed out that the construction of airfields and stockpiling of gasoline would be regarded by the Soviet Union as a threat to its security, leading to an increased Soviet pressure on Iran and Türkiye. He also thought that the construction of airfields for American use would also cause Moscow to think that the North Atlantic Treaty was offensive in purpose. President Harry Truman supported his views. For this reason, the policy paper on Greece and Türkiye (entitled as the NSC 42/1) did not mention about the construction of airfields for future American use. It pointed out that American assistance should focus on the development of Turkish armed forces to “insure Turkey’s continued resistance to Soviet pressure” and “delay Soviet advance long enough to permit the arrival of American support” (US DOS, 1977: 272). This decision clearly took into account the possible adverse effects of airfield construction on American-Soviet and Turkish-Soviet relations. However, it did not mean that the idea that Turkish territory could be utilised for American strategic purposes was dropped altogether. The evidence of this was an article of the NSC 42/1 which described American long-term interest in Türkiye as “the possible utilization [of the country] for US strategic purposes in the event of a war” with the Soviet Union (US DOS, 1977: 279; Rearden, 1984: 167-168).

Indeed, the conditions became ripe for the construction of airfields for the use of American forces following a major polarization in East-West relations as a result of developments that occurred in the second half of 1949. They were the detonation of first Soviet atomic bomb and the communist victory in the Chinese civil war. The first one, because it marked the end of American monopoly on nuclear weapons, weakened American deterrence. The second one represented a major expansion of the communist world. The two events were seen in Washington as evidence of the fact that “power had shifted in Moscow’s advantage” in the Eurasian land-mass (Gaddis, 1982: 90). Secretary of State Dean Acheson observed that the Russian detonation of a nuclear device “changed everything, and [Truman] realized it ten seconds after it happened” (quoted in Ninkovich, 1994: 183). Interestingly, the Soviet side also had parallel feelings. As William C. Wohlforth has noted (1993: 110, 205), the mood in Moscow was that “the Soviet bomb and communist victory in China made capitalist encirclement beyond the capabilities of the West”. So it was thought to be imperative that American national security policy be revised in order to take into account the increases in the power of the Eastern bloc as well as the availability of American resources to deal with the new situation. To this end, the American government carried out a study which produced a new national security policy statement (NSC 68) in April 1950. Its findings

had profound effects on American views of European and Middle Eastern security and on American approach to its security relations with Türkiye.

The Implementation of the New American Strategy, the Middle East and Türkiye: 1950-1952

In order that the US could overcome the Soviet challenge in the long run, the NSC 68 recommended a rapid and sustained improvement in all kinds of Western strength, especially the military one, for two reasons. Firstly, it was predicted that the Soviet Union was likely to have enough capability to destroy the US by 1954. So when it reached that point, its leaders might intend to win a war by a surprise attack (Gaddis, 1982: 105; Etzold and Gaddis, 1978: 401-402, 440). Secondly, it was considered that changes in balance of power could occur “not only as a result of economic manoeuvres or military action, but from intimidation, humiliation or even loss of credibility.” If any such developments took place, the mere existence of the Soviet threat could cause “psychological insecurity” to spread along the periphery and “upset the entire structure of post-war international relations.” So the protection of all points along the perimeter of the Soviet bloc was necessary because all were of equal importance (Gaddis, 1982: 91-92, 109).

The document speculated that, at times of crises, the American economy could provide enough resources to carry out the main recommendation. It contained no estimate of the amount the US could allocate for the increased military commitments; but it implied that the US currently had the capacity to triple its defence expenditures without causing any serious damage to American economy (Etzold and Gaddis, 1978: 436-437). Despite the optimism of the document, however, it was difficult for the American government to agree to implement that recommendation. However, the North Korean attack on South Korea in June 1950 ensured its approval in September 1950. This was because it led American authorities to believe that American nuclear superiority could not prevent Moscow from resorting to war by proxy on the periphery and that American failure to respond to it might call American credibility into question elsewhere (Ninkovich, 1994: 201-202).

The implementation of the NSC 68 had profound implications. Firstly, before the implementation of NSC 68, there was an emerging trend in Western/American strategic thinking that tended to de-emphasise the role of eastern Mediterranean, especially the Suez base area, in a prospective war with the Soviet bloc. It began emerging in late 1948 for military and political reasons. Militarily, the production of longer range aircraft (B-36) was promising, making it

more reasonable to launch strategic offensive from facilities in Britain, Alaska, and Okinawa rather than the Suez base. Politically, anti-Western developments in the Middle East were forcing American officials to find alternative areas for staging strategic offensive. Among them, the most important ones were the establishment of the state of Israel and rising nationalism in the Arab World that problematized the British military presence in the Middle East. The rise of nationalism especially was making the status of the Suez base uncertain because nationalist groups were preventing the Egyptian government from granting the British the right to use the base in peace-time and the re-entry rights in case of an international crisis. These factors led the Americans to accord priority to the western Mediterranean-North Africa area over the eastern Mediterranean-Middle East area. Even they informed their British and Canadian allies in October 1949 that in the event of a war those forces earmarked for the defence of the Middle East were to be transferred to the bases in North Africa. The defence of the region in a war was regarded as the British responsibility, at least initially (Cohen, 1997: 46-47).

Efforts to increase American military capacities as envisaged by the NSC 68, however, reinforced another trend in Western strategic thinking regarding the defence of Western Europe and the role of the Middle East in relation to defence of Western Europe in a prospective war with the Soviet Union. This trend started to emerge with the formation of NATO. Before NATO, it was presumed that the US and Western European allies were not able to hold Western Europe at the initial stages of a war. But in the summer of 1949 military planning started to stress the importance of retaining a substantial bridgehead on the Iberian Peninsula in order to avert the need for an amphibious re-conquest of the continent. This understanding contemplated the northern and eastern flanks of Europe as the areas from where air and naval support for the NATO forces in Europe could be provided. As retaining some parts of Europe was gradually included in NATO's defence strategy, the Eastern Mediterranean and the land around it again became significant for defence of Europe.⁴

Secondly, with the implementation of the NSC 68 in the early 1950s, the US officials saw the Middle East as one of the areas along the Soviet periphery

4 The views of the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (General Eisenhower) provided the basis of this strategy. He informed the US president and his staff at a meeting in January 1951 about the significance of the northern and southern flanks of Europe in defence of central Europe against the numerically superior Soviet bloc forces. He pointed out that the bodies of water on either side of Europe (the North Sea and the Mediterranean) were controlled by the West and that land on the other side of the water (Britain and North Africa), also controlled by the West, were the most appropriate geography for building air bases. He proposed that a Soviet attack in the centre could be responded to by air and naval assaults from both flanks, allowing the centre (the land forces) to hold and forcing the enemy to pull back (US DOS, 1981: 454).

where the Soviet Union would challenge the West by means short of war. This view led them to make adjustments in the American policy towards the Middle East on two issues during the tenure of the Truman administration. The first one was related to the defence of the region. American officials envisaged that the US should concentrate on improving the defence of the countries in the northern belt of the region, namely the idea of forward defence. This idea took into account the scarcity of American manpower and resources, the priority given to Europe, British military presence in the region, the weakening abilities of Britain, Western access to Middle Eastern oil, and the rise of Arab nationalism. Nevertheless, the Truman administration did not produce a coherent concept of forward defence because it did not consider that the time was right for the US to take primary responsibility for the defence of the region before American commitments to Europe and Korea were fully met (US DOS, 1986: 266). As a result, it continued to describe American contribution to the defence of the region in a prospective war as providing “aid in keeping open British line of communication through the Mediterranean, and of delaying, as far as possible, any Soviet advance through Turkey, Iraq and Syria” (Cohen, 1997: 47).

The second issue was about the improvement of Western political position in the region. The Americans observed that all Arab governments were oriented towards the West in varying degrees and that communism was weak as a political force in the region. However, they also observed, the regional governments were taking positions against Western interests for various reasons. To them, the most important sources of anti-Western attitudes in the region were deteriorating economic and social conditions, the negative impression of Britain on Arab people, and the support given by the West to Zionism. They were used by the anti-Western nationalist movements of different political persuasions (such as nationalist, communist and Islamist) in order to affect government policies. Such movements were successful to the extent that many governments saw the Soviet Union as a remote threat and Britain and Israel, both of which were allies of the US, as immediate threats. Those observations led the US policy makers to use various methods to sustain western orientation of regional states. They supported pro-Western governments against nationalist forces in many ways, which included even staging a *coup d'état* as in the case of Iran (1953). They encouraged Britain for an orderly transition of power to regional countries. They tried to persuade Arab states that cooperation with the West, reaching a settlement with Israel and siding with the west against communism were also their interest.⁵

5 US DOS (1978) and US DOS (1982) contain a large number of documents on this subject. The consulted documents appear on the following pages: US DOS, 1978: 223, 271-276; US DOS, 1982: 25, 103.

The increasing American interest in improving Western political posture in the region as well as the developing concept of forward defence of the region made Turkish contribution to regional defence more important in the eyes of the American officials (US DOS, 1982: 5-6). In this regard, it was predicted that growing Turkish military power with American aid would increase its ability to hold a Soviet offensive, making a Soviet advance towards oilfields of the region and the Suez base area very complicated. For this reason, the US government considered in early 1951 to increase substantially the amount of military supplies in order to make possible for Turkish army to increase its manpower (Cohen, 1997: 273, 276, 300; US DOS, 1982: 5). Later, after Turkish admission into NATO, the US officials put more emphasis on delaying Soviet advance and forward defence issues to the extent that in the summer of 1952, the State Department requested from defence planners to study their feasibility from a military point of view (US DOS, 1986: 266-267). On the same subject, the Chairman of the JCS, General Omar Bradley's view reflects the approach in Washington. He predicted that with the accession of Turkey to NATO, the forward defence became militarily more feasible, provided Iran did not go communist. In his view, "with the Turkish Army, plus US and UK air power working on the flank, ensured that any invading force approaching the Middle East through Iran would be impeded if not prevented from conquering the region" (US DOS, 1986: 280-281).

For Washington, probably more important than the contribution of Turkish armed forces to Middle Eastern defence was ensuring the access by the West to air bases and other facilities on Turkish soil during peace-time as well as in the event of a war. This issue became more complicated when the American officials thought that construction of American-sponsored military facilities and other efforts to strengthen Turkish defences would have a strategic impact. Such a thinking on the part of Americans developed roughly between the fall of 1950 and winter of 1951. At that time, the American Navy was considering to mine the Turkish Straits, assuming that Türkiye "might be able to prevent the passage of Soviet submarines and surface ships from the Black Sea through the Straits to the Mediterranean". The Air Force was demanding "far-reaching Turkish commitments on airfields ... [so that] "the US could use Turkey effectively as a base for air operations" (US DOS, 1982: 1118). On this subject, it was considered that the existing Turkish airfields were far from meeting the desired requirements but the prospect was encouraging given that the reconstruction of existing airfields and building new ones according to a US-sponsored aid programmes would "result in considerable improvement within one year" (US DOS, 1982: 1124-1125, articles 13

and 14). All of these planned actions were in conformity with, as explained above, the NATO's defence planning which put emphasis on strengthening Europe's southern flank, and American efforts to preserve the *status quo* in the Middle East in peace time and to defend it during a prospective war.

However, the problem was that the Turkish government was reluctant to further develop strategic relationship with the US along the lines envisaged by American officials. This was because Turkish-American military relationship was seen by the Soviet Union as threatening, causing Turkish decision makers to fear that Moscow would take counter-measures. This concern was raised for the first time by Ankara when Turkish government sought the NATO membership in 1949 in order to get a formal American guarantee against the Soviet Union (Leffler, 1992: 289). At that time, the Americans did not support Turkish membership as they were against expanding NATO's area of responsibility.

However, the issue of getting a sort of written guarantee became more important as Turkish-American defence collaboration deepened. The status of associate membership in NATO, which was granted to Türkiye in September 1950, was far from satisfying the Turkish government. For this reason, the Turkish government pressed for a quick decision by Washington about the desirable form of security arrangement with Türkiye in February 1951. At that time, President Celal Bayar informed the American officials about his dissatisfaction with its present position in the partnership with the US and demanded a firm American security guarantee (US DOS, 1981: 469-470). On April 22, Turkish Ambassador to Washington, Feridun Cemal Erkin, conveyed a message of the Turkish government to the Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, asking the US government to clarify its position about Turkish request for a reciprocal security arrangement, even if such a reply might be negative. He also mentioned, on another occasion, that his country "might be forced to take security measures of its own", implying that Türkiye might pursue the policy of neutrality. Although the issue of formal guarantee was already under consideration by the American government, the Turkish pressure apparently made a decision on the matter more urgent (US DOS, 1981: 516-517; US DOS, 1982: 1144). The American government reviewed its position on the matter, which resulted in a new policy paper in May, the NSC 109.

The NSC 109 explained the long-term American military objectives in Türkiye. For peacetime, it was defined as the improvement of Turkish military power in order to increase Turkish capacity to resist communism. In wartime, the objectives would be "to retain for the United States and its allies base areas in Turkey, to delay materially any USSR advance, and with allied

support, to assure control by the Western powers of the Eastern Mediterranean and the security of base areas in Egypt.” (US DOS, 1982: 1153). The document also stated that the US should support Turkish membership in NATO in order “to assure [its] full cooperation in international security measures, and in the event of war its co-belligerency, the use of Turkish bases and other facilities, and the closure of the Straits to the USSR.” (US DOS, 1982: 1161).

The endorsement of NSC 109 by President Truman on May 24, 1951, meant that the US preferred Türkiye’s admission into NATO as the most desirable form of security arrangement and that the US related Türkiye primarily to the defence of Europe. However, the US continued to expect Turkish contribution to Middle Eastern security for mainly two reasons. Firstly, as pointed out above, the developing NATO defence concept, which emphasised the role of flanks for defence of Europe, increased the military significance of the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Secondly, the US continued to see the maintenance of Western position in the Middle East as vital for the protection of Western alliance. The issue of the establishment of a legal structure for defence of the Middle East, namely the Middle East Command (the MEC) which was proposed by the British, provided the opportunity for the American officials to obtain Turkish commitment to Middle Eastern defence.

Turkish participation in the MEC was one of the subjects of talks between Britain and the US that was going on for a while in the summer of 1951. The main objective of the British by forming the MEC was to secure its access to the base on the Suez Canal zone with Egyptian consent. Britain wanted to include Egypt, the US, France and Türkiye to the organization. But the initiative failed to advance because of disagreements between Britain and the US over NATO command structure for the Mediterranean and over the relationship between NATO and the proposed MEC. Nevertheless, the talks continued. After the American government had decided to support Turkish admission into NATO, the subject of Turkish membership in both organizations also came to the agenda of the talks. After intense negotiations in the summer of 1951, the two sides agreed a package deal over the command and membership issues. According to the terms of the deal, the British dropped their demand that Turkish entry into NATO be made conditional on its prior agreement to join the MEC. In return, the Americans agreed to join the British as co-sponsors of the MEC and to persuade the Turks to take part in the Command (Cohen, 1997: 268-271; Leffler, 1992: 425). Türkiye agreed to participate in the MEC along the terms proposed by the package deal and promised to “take an unspecified

defence role in the Middle East” (Hale, 2015: 86). The resolution of the matter cleared the most important hurdle before Turkish membership in NATO.⁶

The early 1950s saw the addition of another aspect to American consideration of Turkish role in the Middle East. As explained above, although the US did not assume primary responsibility for defence of the Middle East, its involvement in political and military affairs of the region increased substantially in the early 1950s. Similarly, Turkish-American political and military ties developed rapidly in the same period. In such an environment, the American officials assessed whether Türkiye could be a model for Middle Eastern states to emulate and undertake diplomatic initiatives in order to encourage the Arab states to cooperation with the West. On the former, it was considered that Turkish secular political system might provide an example for the countries in the region. On the latter, the Americans took into account that the sources of anti-Western attitudes in the Middle East, which were mentioned above, were gaining strength, causing the deterioration of relations between the regional governments and the western ones. Besides they took into account Turkish willingness to help Western powers to facilitate their relations with regional countries. Their considerations on this issue even led them to assess the feasibility of advising Türkiye to assume the role of encouraging Arab states to take part in Western-sponsored initiatives for the region. This role was also referred as Turkish leadership.⁷

American interest in Turkish leadership in the region, however, did not grow much in 1950-1952 period. A study by a regional office of the State Department raised the following points in this regard. First, the Arabs and Turks did not trust each other because of lingering memories of Ottoman rule and World War I. Second, the Turkish stand on specific international issues, such as its relations with the West and Israel, were seen as inimical to the Arab interests. Some Arab States even regarded Türkiye as “an instrument of the West attempting to win the Arab states away from a position of neutrality without an adequate *quid pro quo*”. Third, there was a strong rivalry between Hashemite dynasties (ruling Iraq and Jordan) and Egypt for leadership in the Arab world. Close relations between Ankara and the former did not facilitate

6 Despite Turkish and American participation in the MEC, the project failed mainly because of Egyptian rejection of the MEC, American refusal to make a direct military commitment to the Middle East, and the diminished need for the MEC after Turkish and Greek entry into NATO. The revised version of the MEC, the Middle East Defence Organisation (proposed by the British in the summer of 1952), also failed for similar reasons (Cohen, 1997: 281-295).

7 A regional policy statement, dated 28 December 1950, describes the achievement of the following as the interest of the United States: “Assumption by Turkey of more interest in and influence among the Near Eastern countries as a stabilizing force in the area and as a means of strengthening their orientation toward the West.” (US DOS, 1978: 257).

its closer relations with the rest of the Arab world. And lastly, Türkiye was not expected to shoulder defence responsibilities beyond its borders given its limited military capabilities. Nevertheless, the idea of Turkish leadership was not ruled out for the future.⁸ In 1952, the American policy towards the Middle East came to the agenda of the National Security Council. The Council decided that the US should increase its share of responsibility in the region. During the deliberations of this decision, the Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested that “it would be wiser to encourage Turkey, with its stable government, to assume “primary leadership” among Middle Eastern nations.” The proposal was not approved by the Council (Poole, 1998: 178). But this matter came to the agenda again in 1953 within the context of the “northern tier” concept which was developed by the next American government.

Conclusion

This study has focused on American involvement in the defence of the Middle East and American interest in the defence of Türkiye between 1946 and 1952. It reveals that the US first interested in the denial of Turkish territory to the Soviets. Gradually Washington authorities paid attention to the development of Turkish own capacities through American assistance and the American access to Turkish territory and facilities in a future war with the Soviet bloc. Lastly, in addition to the previous ones, they showed interest in Turkish participation in Western-led diplomatic activity in the early 1950s.

As pointed out in this study, American involvement in the Middle East was a function of American strategy of containment. Although the US prioritised the defence of Western Europe, the connections that were established between the European and Middle Eastern defence ensured American involvement in the latter. Nevertheless, the US assumed some responsibility in the defence of the region, leaving the main responsibility to the British.

The conditions surrounding American involvement in the Middle East provided an aspect of the context in which Turkish-American security relations developed. The other aspect of it was Turkish desire to cooperate with the West, especially the US, in the post-war era. Turkish fears of Russia and communism

8 Turkey and its Near Eastern Neighbours: The Problem of Leadership (the source text is an annex to “Memorandum from Moore (GTI) to Rountree (GTI), 12 September 1951. In *United States National Archives, RG 59, Lot file, 58 D 610*, box 1, file: “Studies on Turkey 1951-52”).

On the second point, a similar observation was made by a State Department official who thought that Turkish prestige in Arab circles was surprisingly low because of Türkiye’s strong support for the Western initiatives and its efforts to be part of Europe by joining NATO. To him, a growing number of Arab officials felt that “Turkey has been induced to accept and to help enforce decisions, several also of which she had had no part in making, which are not in their opinion, in their long term interest” (US DOS, 1986: 257).

together with the Soviet territorial demands were the main factors that directed Turkish decision makers to seek cooperation with the West in the political and military fields. Turkish ideal of “westernisation” facilitated such a cooperation. This study confirms that pro-Western stance of Turkish governments became a factor that was valued highly by American officials when deciding their positions with regard to the defence of Türkiye as well as Turkish contribution to the defence of the Middle East and Western Europe.

This study reveals that the realities surrounding American involvement in Middle Eastern defence and Turkish need for the support of an outside power enabled the US to be the side that determined to a great extent the shape and the scope of politico-military relations according to its preferences (as Baba (2020) has observed, this continued generally to be the case during the rest of the cold war period). This can be seen clearly in the cases of American objection to Soviets in 1946, the provision of military assistance to Türkiye under the Truman doctrine, the issue of modernization of Turkish armed forces, the construction of bases and other military facilities on Turkish territory, and Turkish participation in western-sponsored diplomatic activities which intended to strengthen Western position in the Middle East.

The case of formal American guarantee to Türkiye can be seen as an exception to a certain extent. By showing the American side that neutrality could be an option, Turkish government managed to convince the American side to provide a formal guarantee. But it should be emphasised that during the process of joining the Western alliance, Türkiye agreed to conduct its relations with the Middle East in coordination with the West as in the case of the MEC initiative. This allowed the US officials to consider the forward defence of the region in 1952 without any hesitation about Turkish cooperation in the implementation stage.

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