Shifting away From Strategic Ambiguity: What should the United States Foreign Policy be vis à vis the Kurds in the Middle East

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Abstract

This thesis outlines current United States foreign policy vis à vis the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, which has heretofore been characterized by strategic ambiguity. By carrying out a thesis attempts to answer to the broader question of “what should U.S. foreign policy be vis à vis the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds?”. The U.S. is faced with three options: it can provide either a strong, mild, or no support to the Kurds. This thesis advocates for the U.S shift away from the current policy of strategic ambiguity towards a more robust – but not too strong – support of the Kurds. Indeed, a stronger support of the Kurds is essential for the U.S. to preserve its strategic national interest in the Middle East. However, such support should be moderate and functional to the creation of an area of containment where U.S. can monitor Iran, Russia, and the results of the fight against ISIS and terrorism more in general. In this way, the U.S. may help fulfilling the number one national objective, namely to preserve a secure homeland free from terrorism and promote and protect the interests of its allies worldwide. Chapter 1 of this thesis answers to the question “what is the current U.S. policy vis à vis the Middle East?”. It ranks and outlines current U.S. national interests, and identifies its allies and enemies in the Middle East. Chapter 2 answers to the question of “why are the Kurds relevant for the U.S. in the Middle East?”. This section will show how the Kurds contribute to the implementation of U.S. foreign policy goals in the Middle East. Chapter 3 of this report advocates for the shift from the U.S. strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds to a more effective support of those latter and will answer to the broader question of “what should the U.S. policy vis à vis the Kurds be?”.

Keywords: Kurdistan, U.S. foreign policy, U.S.-Kurdish relations;
Dedication

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:
you’ll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.
Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.
Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you’re destined for.
But don’t hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you’re old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.
And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.
-Constantine Peter Cavaf

To my mother and father, Cristina and Alberto, who have taught me that omnia vincit amor. To Father Giorgio Noé, who saved my life and gave me the hope necessary to begin again. To my brother Luca, who has always believed in me. To Gloria Ceci, who has been my second mother while in Rome, and has understood me and supported me all the way through.
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CENTCOM</td>
<td>United States Central Command</td>
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<tr>
<td>DFNS</td>
<td>Democratic Federation of Northern Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</td>
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<td>KRG</td>
<td>Kurdish Regional Government</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>PKK</td>
<td>Kurdistan Workers’ Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDF\</td>
<td>Syrian Democratic Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>U.S.</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>YPG</td>
<td>People’s Protection Unit</td>
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Table 1: Kurdish Inhabited Area

![Map of Kurdish Inhabited Area](image)

*Source: United States Central Intelligence, 2002*
Table 2: Geography of the conflict in Afrin

Geography of the conflict in Afrin. Source: Turkey targets Kurdish forces in Afrin, 2018

Table 3: Distribution of Kurdish Population between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

Table 4: Kurdish Rojava in Syria and Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq.

Source: Snyder, 2018

Table 5: The Kirkuk- Ceyhan Pipeline.

Source: Stratfor, 2016
1. Introduction

Between 2001 and 2016, a major shift in U.S. relations with the Kurds—an ethnic group split between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey (See Table 1 and 3) – occurred. In particular, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds¹ played a key role in the U.S. fight against ISIS². Since 2014, the U.S. has trained and supported about more than 60,000 Syrian- and Iraqi-Kurdish militias, namely the People’s Protection Unit (YPG)³ and the Peshmerga (Perry & Evans, 2018). Being the most capable and effective local forces the U.S., the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds had come to believe the U.S. was their ally and would benefit their quest for independence⁴. However, President Donald Trump’s inaction during the attacks against the Kurds between the end of 2017 and the beginning 2018 makes it clear that the U.S foreign policy is at odds with strong alliances. Indeed, the U.S. did not intervene during the Iraqi-Iranian led invasion of the Iraqi-Kurdish Kirkuk in October 2017⁵. More importantly, the U.S. did not intervene during the ongoing Turkish-led attacks⁶ of the YPG in Afrin (Syria; See Table 2), started in January 2018. These two Kurdish areas are increasingly In particular, U.S. incapability to direct the Turkish-Kurdish conflict⁷ in Syria towards a truce has prolonged and exacerbated the conflict up to the present days.

This undergraduate thesis outlines the current U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity towards the Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds and advocates for its change towards a more robust support of these latter. Strategic ambiguity refers to the U.S. deliberate vagueness on its foreign policy positions, which I hypothesize to constitute the main problem for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and especially with regards to the Kurds. Therefore, U.S. strategic
ambiguity towards the Kurds in the Middle East is our independent variable (IV), while all of the outcomes related to this shift of U.S. foreign policy are our Dependent Variables (IV). Depending on how the IV changes – weak, mild, strong support of the Kurds – the U.S. position in the Middle East changes. While both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds important are key in my discussion, I framed my discussion focusing on the ongoing events in Syria. Indeed, a more stable Syria is figured to be keystone to preserve U.S. interests in the Middle East. The U.S. should establish a network of strategic alliances – strategic defense alliances – in the Middle East, which is inclusive of the Kurds, to defend its interest in the region and in the homeland itself. The U.S. should aim to establish a system of alliance that grant U.S. security in the Middle East, able to counter any potential regional threats as well as threat to its national security, coming from an Arab world united by Russia. Despite NATO is a potential ally to rely on, Turkey’s recent shift in tendency compromises its effectiveness in the Middle East. To better frame our hypotheses and research, we will build on the Rational Model Actor for decision-making, which comprises different theories of foreign policy.

A shift away from strategic ambiguity towards a more robust support of the Kurds is useful to (a) monitor the outcomes of the war on terror to ensure a safe homeland free from terrorism; (b) preserve and expand the United States influence in the Middle East, threatened by Russia; (c) support the policy of containment of Iran; (d) regain the leverage lost in the region by restoring relations with regional allies, like Saudi Arabia. A policy which promotes a stronger but not too strong support of the Kurds is probably the one which maximize results, and might include (A) the establishment of a neutral panel to end the conflict in Afrin and resolve the frictions between the U.S. and Turkey, as well as solving the Turkish-Kurdish conflict; (B) the establishment of an area of containment corresponding to the Kurdish
territories in Northern Syria and Northern Iraq, which monitoring the stabilization of the areas liberated from ISIS and contains Iran; (C) the improvement of ties with the Sunni-majority areas of the Middle East, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This is particularly important in case the attempt to rebuild a relationship of trust with Turkey fails, and either an alliance between Turkey-Iran and Russia or a Shia alliance is finally consolidated. In other words, the U.S. should be prepared to form an axis between the Kurds, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, Trump’s policy of chaos has already favored the establishment of a Russia, Iran, and Turkey *troika* – triarchy (Cunningham, 2018). Particularly, Trump’s decision not to back the Kurds gave an important advantage to Iran, which is expanding its influence at a very fast pace in Syria and in the Middle East more in general (Nasr, 2018, p. 97). Despite this U.S. move may have, to an extent, promoted Iran’s containment as well, Iran is expanding too fast to offer it this kind of advantages. Moreover, in the aftermath of Trump’s declaration of Jerusalem as capital of Israel, Shia fighters in the geo-political region of Palestine, Iraq and Iran seem to have allied, and might ally with Syrian Alawites11 as well, the ruling minority of Syria. If the threat of a Shia alliance exists, and Russia may back this threat, the U.S. shall be prepared to respond, and the Kurds seem to be the most effective and reliable options the U.S. has. Therefore, strategic ambiguity is no longer functional towards the Kurds to preserve the United States interests in the Middle East.

**Strategic Ambiguity**

Strategic ambiguity refers to the practice by the U.S. of being deliberately vague on its foreign policy positions so to avoid disclosing plans and eliciting strong reactions
(Hendrix, 2018). Strategic ambiguity, which allows for different interpretations of the same policy, was particularly endorsed by President Donald Trump since his entry into office in January 2017. To preserve U.S. national interest in the Middle East, President Trump has turned ambiguity into a strategy of “chaos”, intended to produce complete uncertainty with regards to U.S. foreign policy actions abroad (Goldenber & Chollet, 2018). However, in doing so, Trump has ignored the regional challenges for U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Nowadays, because of Trump administration and those which were in office beforehand, it is impossible to find a solution which maximizes results for the Middle East. To manage these challenges and accomplish its objectives, the U.S. is in need of strong and effective local forces to rely on (Mattis, 2018). Strong and reliable local forces are key also given the recent U.S.-led attacks against Bashar Al-Assad’s regime in Syria. A coalition between the United Kingdom, France, and the United States attacked the regime of Bashar al-Assad on April 14th 2018 – following Assad’s use of chemical weapons against civilians. Despite the U.S. action was useful in terms of credibility, Russia may decide to retaliate – even in the most indirect ways – against the U.S., because of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s closeness to Assad. Given the several Iranian proxies in Syria and U.S. likely decertification of Iran Nuclear Deal, Iran may follow Russia, too. Strategic ambiguity has made it difficult for the U.S. to establish regional alliances, as the U.S. has cultivated relationships “with groups at odds with each other” (Geltzer, 2017). Because of this, the U.S. has lost its leverage at the negotiating tables, too (Geltzer, 2017). In other words, the U.S. does not have trustworthy ally, but the notable exception of the Kurds.
Methodology: The Rational Model actor for foreign policy decision-making

As former U.S. National Security advisor H.R. McMaster pointed out before entering his term, strategic ambiguity generally yields undesirable outcomes. In other words, sound strategies tend to work better (2015, p. 202). Trump’s policy of chaos has increased uncertainty of the international arena, which in turn leads states to increase their security measures (e.g. military, weapons, etc.) according to the extent to which they feel threatened (Waltz, 2010, p. 200). This uncertainty of the international arena requires U.S. to shift its foreign policy. This is particularly true when it comes to analyze the U.S. position in the Middle East, in particular with regards to the Kurds. To better advocate for a shift in U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds, this paper will build on the rational model for foreign policy decision making. According to Graham Allison, the rational decision-maker takes value-maximizing decisions, by providing the alternative whose consequences are preferred to any other possible outcome (as cited in Mintz & Sofrin, 2017). In this respect, the steps – later described by Greg Cashman (2013)– to take when framing foreign policy suggestions are the following:

1. Identify the problem;
2. Identify what are the interests and priorities of a given government or institution with respect to a given situation or geographical area;
3. Gather information that could turn beneficial as you try to solve the problem;
4. Identify the main alternatives a given government or institution has when attempting to solve the issue;
5. Evaluate the alternatives through a cost and benefit analysis; and consider the possibility of success;
6. Select an alternative that maximizes the results.
7. Implement decision

We have already identified U.S. strategic ambiguity vis à vis the Kurds as our problem. From this starting point, we attempt to frame an initial discussion based on the rational actor model we have just described. We assume that strategic ambiguity constitutes a problem for the U.S. position in the Middle East, for the election of U.S. President Trump has enhanced the practice of strategic ambiguity. Indeed, Donald Trump’s policy has deepened the Middle Eastern crisis.

In Chapter 1, we identify and rank U.S. national priorities in the Middle East, and outline U.S. allies and enemies in the region, with a special focus on Syria. The U.S. needs to solve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict if it wants to preserve its interests in Syria, as well as find a strategy to avoid making of Syria a second Iraq. As we have already mentioned, preserving a homeland free from terrorism is one of the key objectives for U.S. foreign policy, as well as promoting preserving the interests of U.S. allies in the regions. Allies which, however, the U.S. does not have at the moment. Iran’s containment is also on the podium of the U.S. foreign policy priorities, together with the containment of malign Russian expansion. This section mentions Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, the Kurds of Iraq and Syria, Israel and Saudi Arabia. This section also discusses Russia’s role in the Middle East and its expanding influence in the region, and Russia’s constant interference with Kurdish affairs, from Kirkuk to Afrin. Indeed, the Middle East may become the stage of a fresh outbreak of violence
between Russia and United States after the end of the Cold War (Haass, 2018; Johnson, 2018). If this is not the case, Russia is undoubtedly attempting to isolate the United States in the games of power of the Middle East. Indeed, during operations in Syria, the United States has mostly been a bystander, while “Russia has filled the vacuum, gaining influence and rehabilitating its relationship with Turkey” (Landler & Gall, 2018). Indeed, Turkish attack of Afrin displays a brand-new alliance between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Putin, and extends Russian influence in the region. In Afrin, Russia controls the tempo and the of the operation, and was the one allowing Erdogan’s attack of Syrian Kurds. However, both Turkey and the U.S have interests in “resisting Russia, Iran and the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad” (Landler & Gall, 2018).

Chapter 2 corresponds to the information gathering part of the rational actor model. We gather more information on the Kurds so to understand the role that the Kurds play in U.S. foreign policy and why they are relevant to accomplish the U.S. national goals in the Middle East. U.S. strategy is inherently wrong for a series of good reasons: (1) Kurds are the only effective and resilient force; (2) the U.S. has already spent a lot of resources by training the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds; (3) the U.S. holds no trustworthy ally in the Middle East, with the notable exception of the Kurds (and Saudi Arabia); (4) the Kurds might be a stabilizing force; (5) the Kurds may ally with those forces U.S. seeks to contain; (6) the Kurds are located in a strategic position for the containment of Iraq. First and foremost, the Kurds are the only reliable, resilient, and effective force in the Middle East for the U.S. to rely on. During the fight against Daesh, while Arab forces proved disappointing, the U.S. State Department repeatedly reaffirmed the capability and reliability of the Kurds (Kirmanj, 2018). Second, the U.S. has already spent a huge amount of money in the training of Kurdish forces. The U.S.
Department of State’s investment of more than 500 million dollars to train Kurds and Arab forces since 2014 (Kirmanj, 2018). Third, the U.S. does not hold other trustworthy allies in the Middle East, also given recent developments in U.S.-Turkey relations. Moreover, Turkey has provided “military equipment, logistical assistance and training to ISIS fighters”, and has deepened its ties with Russia, a spoiler for U.S. interests in the Middle Eastern region (Kirmanj, 2018). In the same way, Iraq did not hesitate to back Iran by forming an alliance with Iran to seize Kirkuk, an oil-rich territory whose control might be useful to accomplish U.S. economic interests in the region. In other words, both Turkey and Iraq have aligned with Russian and Iranian interests, and the U.S., currently in a marginal position in the Middle East, needs an ally that in turn needs its support (Kirmanj, 2018). Fourth, the Kurds might be the only force able to stabilize the Middle East and therefore accomplish U.S. interest. The Kurds of Iraq and Syria managed to maintain “a degree of stability in an otherwise chaotic land” and might be the ideal candidate to bring stability in the Middle East (Kirmanji, 2018). Fifth, Russia’s expanding malign influence, which includes the growing support to the Iraqi Kurds coming from Moscow may be difficult to handle in the future. Indeed, Russia did not oppose the independence referendum taking place on September 25th, 2017, despite statements by the U.N. Security Council (Zhdannikov, 2017). As a result of Moscow’s support, Rosneft – Russia’s biggest oil company – purchased most of the shares of the Kurdish main oil pipeline on October 20th, 2017 (Zhdannikov & Soldatkin, 2017). This economic move appeared to be “part of a strategy” by President Vladimir Putin to boost the Kremlin’s influence in the Persian Gulf, by taking advantage of the never-ending crisis between the Kurds and the Iraqis (Zhdannikov & Soldatkin, 2017). An alliance between Russia and the Kurds might be unlikely because of Iran position in between the two. Indeed,
Russia is also backing the Turkish attacks in Afrin. However, the Kurds may raise the stakes if the U.S. – currently engaged in the fight against Assad regime – wants to renew Kurdish help. Sixth, the Kurds are located in a geo-strategic position, namely where “the borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan meet” named Kurdistan (“Kurdistan,” 2016). Having a reliable ally who can monitor what is going on in other countries, from one single portion of land, and be able to respond, might turn out to be particularly useful. In other words, the Kurds might replace the role Turkey has historically hold in U.S. foreign policy with regards to Iran’s containment. Therefore, a foreign policy strategy for the Middle East that relies on strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds is not a solution in line with United States’ interests.

Chapter 3 of this thesis advocates for the shift from the current U.S. policy position of strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds to a mild support – which means, a stronger support of the Kurds and their security but no support to their independence –of the Kurds. Building on Chapter 1 and 2, this chapter identifies the alternatives the U.S. is faced with when selecting the correct policy vis à vis the Kurds and will evaluate them through a cost and benefit analysis. At the same time, it shows that by shifting from strategic ambiguity towards a more robust support of the Kurds, the U.S. would able to maximize its results – which in this case means selecting the least worst option – for its foreign policy. We show both the best scenario the U.S can hope for – which in this case is represented by the least worst situation the U.S. can may be part of – and the worst-case scenario. In redefining its policy towards the Kurds, the United States is faced with three options. The U.S. may decide to (a) provide a strong support of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds; (b) provide a mild – intended as preserving their security without promoting their independence – support of the Syrian Kurds; (c) provide no
support of the Kurds at all –extending the policy of strategic ambiguity. The U.S. may either decide on a strong support of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, which would mean taking an “extreme” decision if the baseline is strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds. Such decision would also imply entering – an indirect – confrontation with Turkey. Turkey, indeed, has not the military means to confront the U.S directly. A too open support of the Kurds would mean for U.S. to enter direct confrontation with Iran as well; compromise its strategic partnership with Iraq (U.S. relations with Iraq); and destroy once and for all the already difficult relations Syria. Therefore, the best option for the U.S. is to support the Kurds moderately, which includes “freezing” some alliances, as with Turkey and Iraq. This approach would avoid perpetuating current policy of strategic ambiguity. This section suggests what the U.S. should do immediately, namely the U.S. should pass from a policy of strategic ambiguity towards one of ‘strategic defense alliance’. In other words, the U.S. should build a network of alliances to defend U.S. interest in the Middle East. More importantly, after the U.S. airstrikes on Syria taking place on April 14th 2017, the U.S. needs more than ever to solve the conflict between the Kurds and Turkey in Afrin, as well as the cross-border issues existing between Turkey and Iraq. Turkey, indeed, has threatened invasion of Iraq in case Peshmerga were allowed to enter Syria. The U.S. should be able to mediate with Turkey and draw attention on why the American and Turkish national interest should be aligned (Landler & Gall, 2018). Indeed, despite Turkey is receiving support from Russia, it strives against Iran for the hegemony of the Middle East. Aligning with Russia for Turkey would mean to align interests with Iran as well.

Final remarks on the topic include American and international opinion on the U.S. position on the Kurdish issue, Turkey, and Iraq. Those opinions matter and have to be partly
taken into account when taking decisions in foreign policy (Knights & Pollock, 2017). Caring too much about public opinion has led to disastrous consequences for the U.S., such as the Iraq’s invasion. However, forgetting about what other members inside of a community think does not lead to better results. Many senators, diplomats, Generals, Colonels, and common citizens both from the U.S. and outside the U.S. have opposed Trump’s decision to turn a blind eye on Iraqi-Kurdistan first. The same people are opposing the position taken with regards to the U.S. relationship with Tukey and Afrin. Most of them are backing an American alliance with the Kurds, and this is mainly due to the fact that the Kurds have shown loyalty and military competence to the U.S. in more than one occasion. While the United States plays ambiguously, Arab and Iranian media “are already interpreting the latest military movements as a clear victory for the Islamic Republic and its Shia allies” (Knights & Pollock, 2018). In other words, the ambiguity of U.S. foreign policy-making is already making the United States appear weaker. The U.S. has lost its leverage in not only in the Middle East, but also in Asia, and partly in Europe. The U.S. is not taken seriously as it used to be, and a pervasive sense of anti-Americanism now characterizes the Middle East and the world in general. This is not only a threat to U.S. interests, but a threat to the stability of the whole world, to pax Americana – namely the status of perpetual peace in most of the world granted by the (super) power of the U.S., which has apparently come to an end. The current situation in the Middle East is a powder keg for the whole world’s stability. The U.S. is the only country military capable of countering such threat.
2. U.S. national interests in Syria

This chapter ranks U.S. national priorities in the Middle East and define U.S. allies and threats in the region. By doing this, the chapter shows how the U.S. practice of strategic ambiguity gave rise to “further challenges for U.S. regional policy” in the Middle East (Barron & Barnes, 2018, p. 2). The U.S. should shift its policy from strategic ambiguity towards the establishment of a network of strategic alliances, which is inclusive and supportive of the Kurds – of their security in particular, rather than their independence – to defend American national interests at home and in the Middle East. This section discusses the roles that Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Kurds – the Kurdish Regional Government and Rojava – play with respect to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The position of these actors is tailored to the ongoing events in Syria. Syria is, indeed, the Middle Eastern country on which the U.S. national interests in the Middle East mostly depend, and is nowadays ravaged by multiple wars. Of these multiple wars, we focus on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, which constitutes a powder keg for U.S. and its allies. However, we cannot speak of Syria, the Syrian Kurds, and of the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) without taking into account Iraq, the Iraqi-Kurds, and the Peshmerga as well, which are cited throughout the section for the sake of completeness in our discussion.

Iraq and Syria are also two of the three countries where American military bases with “sizable combat deployment”, under the jurisdiction of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), are present (CENTCOM, 2016). A total of 7,000 U.S. The reason why this is the case has to do with the threats against U.S. national interests, which are (a) the violent
extremism which characterizes the region, especially Syria; (b) the malign Iranian and Russian expanding influence, whose proxies are in Syria; (c) the decaying Middle Eastern regimes which do not ensure stability of the region, threatening also the U.S. private sector present in the Middle East (Mueller et al, 2018, p.3). If we look at the threats to the American interests in the Middle East, we understand that little or no probability exists for the U.S. military to resolve every of them – especially those of Syria – by shifting its policy of strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds only. However, strategic ambiguity renews the already existing doubts about U.S. capability to promote peace and stability – *pax Americana* – in the Middle East and in the world more in general. These doubts increase, in turn, the deep and pervasive anti-Americanism characterizing the Middle East.

According to these threats, the U.S. current interests in the Middle East are, in order: (1) stabilizing Syria and end the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, therefore helping in the preservation of a homeland free from terrorism; (2) forming new and strong alliances in the Middle East to protect U.S. nationals (CENTCOM) as well as U.S. allies and their interests in the Middle East; (3) so to contain Iran and Russia’s expansion in the region; in this way, the threat of a Shia alliance between Iran, Iraq, and the Syrian regime, as well as of an alliance between Turkey, Iran, and Russia; (4) re-gain the leverage lost in the region (5) preserving U.S. economic interests in the region.

**Traditional U.S. interests in the Middle East: Stabilization protection of U.S. allies**

Stabilizing the Middle East has always been one of the U.S. main national interests, above all because of American private oil-companies present in the region, and of historical regional allies as Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the U.S. wanted to ensure stability
so to ensure “the free flow of natural resources.” (Mueller et al., 2018, p. 2). At the same time, through stability, the U.S. wanted to promote and protect the position of its key allies in the region (Mueller et al., 2017, p.3).

Even though the United States has currently turned in the main oil exporter in the world, the U.S. is not relying on the economic ties with the Middle East as it used to; this is also because the U.S. energy industry is not “structured to achieve” the end of a world leader in the energy industry (Gross, 2018). For this reason, U.S. economic interests have shifted towards Asia, making of economic interests one of the least important U.S. national interests in the region.

However, the stabilization of the Middle East to favor the protection of U.S. allies as well of the promotion of these latter’s interests in the region is still paramount. Indeed, even though the U.S. is left with a few allies in the Middle East – namely, Israel, the Kurds, and Saudi Arabia – the American objective to protect strategic partners appears to be as important as the preservation of a homeland free from terrorism (Mueller et al., 2017, p.3). As U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis claimed, the U.S. needs a more “lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force,” similar to the United States Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) dismantled in 2011 (Summary of the National Defense Strategy, 2018, p.1). This force, together with “a constellation” of alliances should and can sustain and favor American benign influence in the Middle East and in the world, and at the same time favor U.S. allies (National Security Strategy, 2017, p.2). However, the U.S. does not currently hold strong alliances in the Middle East that can promote American influence.

A notable exception to this rule are the Kurds, Israel, and hopefully the renewed entente with Saudi Arabia, every of them constituting potential strong alliances for the U.S. in
the region. Particularly, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are nowadays “sharing identical views” on the regional issues and the crisis affecting the Middle East (“Saudi Arabia, U.S.,” 2018). This latter is the third highest military spender in the world, together with the U.S. and China (“US, China, Saudi Arabia,” 2018). The U.S. has partly or completely lost the alliances – at least in terms of reliability of such allies – of Turkey and Iraq, whose interests appear to have ally with Iran and Russia. The reason why this is the case is mainly related to strategic ambiguity. Because of this policy, the U.S. engaged in operations – as during the fight against ISIS – with groups which were at odds with each other, while avoiding any strong support of any of them (Geltzer, 2018). Because of allying with both Turkey and the Kurds, for instance, Turkey, one of U.S. historical allies, is nowadays very far from the U.S. and its interests.

However, strategic alliances are particularly important to stabilize Syria – avoiding making of it a second Iraq for the U.S. To stabilize the Middle East, the U.S. should therefore start from Syria. Indeed, by stabilizing Syria, the U.S. would ensure the protection of American troops present in the CENCOM area of responsibility; the protection of Israeli and Syrian Kurdish proxies in Syria, as well as the protection of Saudi Arabian Interests; the hindrance to Iran’s arming of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, whose illegal traffick of weapons pass exactly through Syria. Moreover, if the U.S. stabilizes Syria would be better able to monitor the outcome of the fight against ISIS. Even though the outcome of the fight against ISIS is in clearly in favor of the Global Coalition against Daesh, terrorist cells are still present in the region. These cells manage to flee from Syria thanks to Turkish attack of the YPG, and settle in areas surrounding Syria, Turkey included (Global Coalition, 2018). When Turkey attacked Afrin (Rojava), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose YPG is the main component, were in South-Eastern Syria fighting against the remaining ISIS militias. YPG
was forced to divert North and stop Turkish advance. By postponing the complete eradication of ISIS from the region, Turkey has increased the risk to US and Western countries’ national security. In this way, it has threatened the result of U.S. war on terror, started with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

A homeland free from terrorism: the war on terror

The campaign in Iraq came as a result of the events of 9/11, when the Middle East became a major U.S. national interest. In 2003, when former U.S. President George W. Bush decided to invade Iraq, the decision itself, its objectives and motivations, were already unclear, following the practice of strategic ambiguity. At that very moment, the U.S. was starting one of its most important campaigns which has lasted until the present days, the war on terror. The war on terror has mainly aimed to preserve a safe homeland free from terrorism. However, the intervention in Iraq was so ambiguous and filled with contradictions that probably constituted the event which irremediably changed the U.S. destiny in the Middle East forever. The intervention in Iraq lasted until when Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, decided to withdraw American troops from Iraq in 2011. However, between 2003 and 2011, the U.S. invested “tremendous resources in the Iraq war”, which led to even more instability and fragmentation of the region, rather than stability (Hadji, 2015, p.516). Since the mission in Iraq took place, indeed, both President Barack Obama and his successor Donald Trump have limited U.S. “involvement in the Middle East”, even when ISIS entered Syria first and then Iraq (Mueller et al., 2017, p.1). Indeed, despite being worlds apart, Obama and Trump share a common point in their foreign policy decision-making in the Middle East, Syria. The U.S. foreign policy position in Syria has been focusing to avoid making another Iraq out of
Syria, and has attempted to let too many American troops in Syria. Today, America’s main objective in Syria is undoubtedly to “prevent nuclear, chemical, radiological, and biological attacks, and block terrorists” from reaching the United States (National Defense Strategy, 2018, p. 2). However, through strategic ambiguity, the U.S. has been making the Middle East even more unstable, and the chances are that this objective is not going to be attained.

Indeed, the recent U.S. airstrikes in Syria against the Assad’s regime – which came seven years – deepened the crisis characterizing Syria. On the one hand, the U.S. attacks renewed the U.S. credibility in the international arena. On the other hand, seen the Iranian and Russian proxies in the region, the U.S. attacks triggered brand-new dynamics which are unclear and dangerous, given the unpredictability characterizing the region. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the U.S. has tried to develop a coherent strategy balancing “U.S. interests and it resources” (Barron & Barnes, 2018). Despite attempting to take a position, President Barack Obama never did his best to topple Assad’s regime, which is considered by the U.S. the reason why the reason why Syria was and is still in war. The U.S. administration maintained a rather ambiguous and little-determined position vis à vis Syria and its government. Despite repeatedly claiming that President Assad and its Alawite regime constituted the core of the problem and events going on in Syria, Obama hesitated to take action and remove the regime in power. By removing Assad from power, Obama would have further deepened the crisis within the borders Syria. Ambiguity of action towards Syria allowed Iran and Russia to expand their position not only in Syria itself, but also Iraq – a U.S. strategic partner (O’Connor, 2018). Moreover, ambiguity put U.S. in a more isolated position in Syria and in the Middle East and allowed non-state actors to proliferate.
However, President Donald Trump decision to attack Syria radically changes U.S. position in the Middle East, and U.S. campaign to preserve a safe homeland. While lawmakers and senator in the U.S. are “unnerved”, because of Trump’s concession of Syria to Russia and Iran, the situation in Syria is now more unpredictable than ever before (Barron & Barnes, 2018). Indeed, Iran and Russian proxies present in –what is left of– Syria, might retaliate. Among them, Hezbollah plays a very important role. Hezbollah – a Shia terrorist group based in Lebanon¹⁹ – is backed by Iran – a Shia majority country.

**Iranian Expansion**

Iran’s weapons supporting Hezbollah pass from Syria, and this latter expansion constitute one of the main threat for U.S. interests in the Middle East. In the last five years, Israel –a U.S. historical ally in the Middle East – has bombed any possible Iranian effort to” move high-tech material to Hezbollahin Lebanon”, which passed through Syria (Abrams, 2017). Nowadays, Iran is planning to build a “military airfield near Damascus”, and has been negotiating with Assad regime to obtain “its own naval pier in the port of Tartus”, in exchange for Iranian soldiers’ deployment (Abrams, 2017). Iranian expansionary initiatives have been unacceptable to Israel, which has engaged in talks with Russia and the United States (Abrams, 2017). These initiatives are unacceptable for the U.S as well., as confirmed by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, which sets Iran containment as one of the U.S. national priorities.

These Iranian expansionary initiatives came as a result of breaking its alliance with the U.S. back in 1979. The United States had, during many years which marked the Cold War, relied on Iran as a part of a *Twin Pillar* policy with Iran and Saudi Arabia which aimed at
bringing stability to the region (U.S-Saudi Arabia, 2017). However, in 1979, Iran’s Islamic revolution put an end to this U.S. foreign policy objective, leaving Saudi Arabia as the sole U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf (U.S-Saudi Arabia, 2017). Despite the relationship between U.S. and Saudi Arabia seemed to have inclined during Obama’s presidency, Trump played a vital part in restoring it (U.S-Saudi Arabia, 2017). Iran’s main concern – since 1979 – has been to reassert its own influence in the Middle East, and it has done it by intervening in a lot of conflicts, as well as by developing programs of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). In 2015, however, former U.S. President Barack Obama managed to cut a deal with Iran as per negotiated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a document which resulted from an agreement between Iran and six world Power (P5+ Germany) (Iran Nuclear deal, 2016). The document had been negotiated since 2013, and limited Iran's nuclear program, braking its ability to produce nuclear weapons, in exchange for the gradual lifting of international sanctions (Iran Nuclear deal, 2016). When current U.S. President Donald Trump decertified the Iranian Nuclear Deal, a decision that U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis opposed, the Iran-U.S. relations precipitated as never before in history. Iran, however, had never stopped expanding its influence in the Middle East. The effect of such expansion is “still unknown, as is how the Iran-Saudi conflict will develop”, as well as the role Russia will play in this game for hegemony in the Middle East (Barron & Barnes, 2018). What we know for sure is that in Syria, Iran has gaining influence over Syrian Shia’s militias at a peace Bashar al- Assad cannot control, and it has already outpaced this latter control of them (Smyth, 2018).

Moreover, Russia is already controlling Syria and Assad, and its influence has outpaced the U.S. one.
**Russian malign expansion**

Russia took advantage of U.S. unwillingness to fight, after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a war against terrorism. Indeed, the fight against ISIS was not fully considered by the U.S. its responsibility as the campaign in Iraq was (Barron & Barnes, 2018, p.1). As James Mattis reaffirmed, Russia – in a broader plan shared with China – has been undermining “the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and rules” (Summary of the National Defense Strategy, 2018, p.2). Russia is expanding its influence and at the same time marginalizing U.S. in the Middle East and beyond. It follows that an imperative U.S. national interest is to contain such expanding influence. In particular, in Syria may become the stage of a new proxy war between Russia and United States after the end of the Cold War (Haass, 2018; Johnson, 2018). If this is not the case, also seen President Trump’s closeness to Putin, Russia is undoubtedly attempting to isolate the U.S. in the games of power of the Middle East. Indeed, during the whole time of the operations in Syria against ISIS, the United States has mostly been a bystander, while “Russia has filled the vacuum, gaining influence and rehabilitating its relationship with Turkey” (Landler & Gall, 2018). Moreover, Russia has improved its ties with Iraq and the Kurds as well, two strategic partners of the U.S. in the region.

Russia had, indeed, reaffirmed its support of the YPG during the fight against ISIS, before Turkey attacked Afrin. Turkey did not protest for such support, which casts doubt about Turkey’s blaming of the U.S. support of the Kurds\(^{20}\). Moreover, Russia was the only country, together with Israel, that did not officially oppose the Kurdish referendum for independence taking place on September 25\(^{th}\) 2017, despite statements against this latter by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Zhdannikov, 2017). The referendum held by the
Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), resulted in approximately 93 percent of Iraqi-Kurds voting in favor of Kurdish secession from Iraq (CSIS, 2017). The referendum not only aimed at attaining independence through popular consensus, but also at determining the status of those areas disputed between Erbil and Baghdad. As a result of this support, Rosneft – Russia’s biggest oil company – purchased most of the shares of the Kurdish main oil pipeline on October 20th, 2017 (Zhdannikov & Soldatkin, 2017). This economic move appeared to be “part of a strategy” by President Vladimir Putin to boost the Kremlin’s influence in the Persian Gulf, by taking advantage of the never-ending crisis between the Kurds and the Iraqis (Zhdannikov & Soldatkin, 2017).

Even though Russia national interest is probably a spoiler in the Iraqi-Kurdish case – which, however, would not have existed if U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity was still there – threats to U.S. hegemony in the region should be kept under control. Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Iraq are indeed closer and closer, and a Shia Arab world united by Russia may represent and support Russian influence in the Middle East. However, another historical U.S. ally, President Erdogan, is increasingly close to Russia. U.S. officials, focused on “Erdogan's Putinesque consolidation of power and disregard for human rights”, are increasingly worried about this duo, which may come to include Iran. With Syria already on its side, Russia’s axis of alliance is dangerous. Turkey, Iran, and Russia interests in Syria, indeed, seem to have aligned, and they are ready to decide on the future of Syria regardless of U.S. position in the region.
U.S. and Turkey’s frictions in Afrin

Even though Turkey has been a close ally of the United States for more than eighty years, the events in Afrin “prisoned” the U.S.-Turkey relations as never before in history (Dalay, 2018). The U.S. and Turkey were not able to find a common ground so to end the dispute over People’s Protection Unit (YPG), the main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the militias liberating Raqqa from the presence of ISIS. The apple of discord between the U.S. and Turkey is the fact that the U.S. has been arming the Syrian-Kurdish army since 2017. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed his dissatisfaction with U.S. support of the Kurds more than once, and in those occasions the U.S. had pledged to remove the support its support to the Syrian Kurds. However, the U.S. has kept arming the Kurds up to the present days, a strategically-ambiguous move that has pushed Turkey closer to Russia and Iran. The Turkish attacks against the Kurds in Afrin, Syria – which allowed the members of ISIS not yet neutralized to re-organize22 – apparently were the result of the pressures coming from Moscow and directed towards Ankara. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict has become a key interest for U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. should find a political solution to frictions with Turkey, even though Turkey has, once more, proved an untrustworthy ally.

Turkey’s growing ties with Russia and Iran look “incompatible with its NATO identity, and Western-centric geopolitical and security identity” (Dalay, 2018). This Western-centric identity, however, was long denied to Turkey by the European Union, and the U.S has never pressured the EU to take a decision in favor of Turkey. Russian President Vladimir Putin has taken advantage of this weakness in Turkish relations with the Western world to promote his own interests in the Middle East, and persuaded Turkish President Erdogan to promote Russian interests in the region. Russia together with Iran – and now with Turkey –is
apparently attempting to build a New Middle East, far from democracy and Western values and identity. The three powers have indeed repeatedly met during last months (Citation).

However, both Turkey and the U.S have interests in “resisting Russia, Iran and the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad” (Landler & Gall). Indeed, the U.S.-Turkey relation is the only one that may ensure the stability of the region, also because Turkey is located in a geostrategic position to contain Iran. At the same time, without the U.S. “Turkey would be left to Tehran and Moscow's tender mercies”; in other words, it would be at the mercy of those two countries’ expansionist objectives, rather than their ally (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018). However, too many points of ruptures exist between Turkey and the U.S nowadays, and these ruptures were also caused by the U.S. misuse of strategic ambiguity. Turkish discontent towards the U.S. with regards to Syria probably began during Obama’s administration, when Obama seemed to be too little determined to solve the crisis in Syria and topple Assad regime. Obama started relying on the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds to neutralize jihadists in the region.

From 2011 and 2016, however, the Turkish government had started to be supportive of the Iraqi Kurds as well. This support was above all related to mutual economic interests. Indeed, the independent energy policy pursued by Iraqi-Kurdistan, dubbed as illegal by former Iraqi-Prime Minister Nouri Kamil Mohammed Hasan al-Maliki, established serious economic bond between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds (Park, 2014, p.v). On the contrary, the Syrian Kurds continued to be considered by Ankara as a terrorist group – affiliated with the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party – and President Erdogan did not like the American support of this latter.

After the U.S. raised its protection of the Kurds in 2016, Erdogan grew increasingly concerned over the Kurds’ authority and the *Kurdish issue*. This was also due to the
attempted coup d’état pursued by the Turkish-Kurds against his regime on July 15th, 2016, which President Erdogan figured as plotted by the PKK. For this reason, President Erdogan started purges of the Kurds inside of Turkey, which he lately extended to Syria when he started the on-going Turkish-Kurdish conflict in January 2018 (Cupolo, 2017).

Despite U.S. officials and decision-makers would like to impose sanctions on Turkey for its illegal attack under international law against the Kurds, destroying the relations with Turkey would mean a complete disaster for U.S. foreign policy for three reasons. First, Turkey is the state between the Middle East and Russia, containing both Iran and Russia’s influence. Second, Turkey is the country standing between Europe and the Middle East as well, a longstanding U.S. partner (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018). This means that Turkey also happens to be the filter in-between the Western and Middle Eastern worlds, ensuring this former security, or at least it used to be so. By ensuring the Western world security, Turkey ensured NATO allies security. Moreover, Turkey is a military and economic power, a useful alliance in the “global strategic competition” the U.S. faces almost alone against Russia and China (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018).

Therefore, it would be useful now to find a compromise with Turkey, even though the U.S. has already accommodated some Turkish requests. Indeed, the U.S. reduced support of the Kurds – a move that many in the U.S. considers as a betrayal of the Kurds – came as a result of an attempt to cool Turkey’s rage. Moreover, most of U.S. scholars and U.S. public opinion does not see Turkey as a trustworthy ally anymore, while Kurds continued to be considered the U.S. most loyal ally in the region.
Moreover, historical American allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, fiercely oppose Iran. They also support the Kurds – even though they do not favor their independence. Even though Iran has managed to expand, it may still fear an alliance between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Such alliance would probably shift the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of Israel and Saudi Arabia, and therefore, more broadly speaking, in favor of the U.S. (Abrams, 2017). Moreover, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is growing concerned with Hezbollah as well, because of its influence in Yemen – a fact that also concerns Saudi Arabia. This latter point may draw UAE closer to Saudi Arabia and Israel, and therefore closer to U.S. At the same time, as previously mentioned, Hezbollah is backed by Iran, and therefore strongly opposed by Israel, since these latter are fighting for the hegemony of the Middle East (Barron & Barnes, p. 2). Hezbollah has also been the most important ally for Bashar al-Assad regime in the last five years, which has allowed weapons to enter Syria (Barron & Barnes, p. 2). However, the Palestinians present in the state of Israel, who are mostly Shia, may join an alliance between Iran, Syria, Iraqi Shia, and Hezbollah.

If this is the scenario, Egypt – a Sunni majority country – might be part of this game of alliances too, aligning its interests with the U.S. Indeed, the U.S.- Egypt relations have “have been grounded in a mutual commitment to advancing peace, prosperity and stability in the Middle East” (Egypt- U.S. relations, 2016). This may also be the case seen that Egypt’s relations with Iran have been historically difficult, despite changing for the better in the last decade. In other words, an alliance may be formed based on the Sunni religion, anti-terrorist pushes, and geo-strategic interests which brings Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and the
Kurds to align against a possible Shia alliance – between Syria, Hezbollah, Iran, and Shia Iraqis – of which Iran is the leader.

Iranian expansionary initiatives, which passed through Syria and more specifically Hezbollah, have been unacceptable to Israel, which has engaged in talks with Russia and the United States (Abrams, 2017). Previous efforts made by Netanyahu to get Moscow to stop Iran and Hezbollah traffic of weapons in Syria have failed; however, Syrian and Iraqi Kurds may be a turning point for Israel. Russia, however, will be more likely to distance itself from Israel and back a Shia alliance, and in particular Hezbollah and Syria (Fisk, 2016). Hezbollah has probably been the most important ally for Bashar al-Assad regime – a ruling Shia minority – in the last five years. These Lebanese Shia-terrorist militias, backed by Iran, and countered by Israel, is also a concern for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – UAE (Barron & Barnes, p. 2), also because Hezbollah’s influence in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia, which has been restoring relations with the U.S. since Trump took office in 2017, is also willing to send troops to back U.S. recent operation against the Assad regime, and the UAE may follow (Riyadh, 2018). Israel-U.S. relations have already reached a peak. In other words, a Sunni alliance may be established – seen that Saudi Arabia, the Kurds, and UAE are Sunni majority countries. This possibility seems confirmed by recent President Trump’s visit in the Middle East, who visited Saudi Arabia and Israel in particular. This alliance would counter a possible Shia alliance between Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, and Iraqi Shia - which Israel might join. However, Russia is making the Shias win in Syria – and in the Middle East more in general, and the U.S. needs to hurry if it wants its interests preserved (Fisk, 2016). Despite the U.S. and NATO are those with the greatest military capacity at their
disposal, an Arab Shia world united by Russia may constitute a consistent threat to U.S. national and regional interests.

Re-gain the leverage lost in the Middle East

U.S. national and regional interests are threatened also by the fact that the U.S. has lost leverage in the Middle East. U.S. leverage has eroded as the result of U.S. action, but also as a result of security policies in the region (Metz, 2017). The shift in Middle Eastern countries security policy is undoubtedly due to ISIS. However, U.S. is increasingly isolated from the Middle Eastern games of power, which is the main result of U.S. strategic ambiguity. Many missteps related to strategic ambiguity have contributed to the U.S. loss of leverage in the Middle East, included the 2003 campaign in Iraq and the killing of Saddam Hussein, after having signed a deal with this latter; U.S. inaction is Syria and its inability to topple the Assad Regime; the decertification of the Iran Nuclear Deal; the declaration of Jerusalem as capital of Israel; and Russian expanding malign influence. However, U.S. inaction during the attacks against the Kurds in Afrin, and, in particular, those in Kirkuk have contributed to declare U.S. loss of leverage in the Middle East as an established fact (Metz, 2017).

It follows that a compelling U.S interests in the Middle East is to re-establish its leverage at the negotiating tables. As Metz argues, “strategic leverage has a distinct logic or, at least, a set of rules. For instance, it has to be carefully accumulated before it can be used. Leverage cannot be ginned up quickly or created simply by having military power.” (2018) Leverage requires a consistent and clearly defined foreign policy strategy, which the U.S. does not currently have, and has generated a status of pervasive anti-Americanism characterizing the whole of the Middle East. If this situation is not solved, the U.S. sanctions,
deterrence, and promises at the negotiating tables would not be taken seriously anymore. The
U.S. has lost its credibility and it needs to regain it soon, and the attacks on the Assad regime.
Therefore, strong and strategic alliances are needed so to prove American trustworthiness.

Conclusions

The U.S. is in need for strategic allies to preserve its national interests in the Middle
East, above all with regards to the current situation in Syria, which needs to be stabilized to
avoid a war between proxies. U.S. strategic ambiguity, which aimed to accomplish U.S.
objectives in the region, actually deepened the crisis affecting the Middle East, and gave a
strategic advantage to Russia and Iran. Strategic ambiguity distanced Turkey interests from
those of the U.S, and pushes Iraq towards Russia and Iran. In addition, the U.S. lost its
leverage in the region. The Shia are winning over the Middle East, and this is thanks to Russia
and the U.S. flawed policy of strategic ambiguity. However, a U.S.-UAE- Saudi Arabian and
Kurdish axis may be formed so to counter this consistent threat. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and
UAE’s relations with Israel relationship are increasingly getting closer, and are nowadays
beyond mere commercial exchanges. Israel and Egypt might join this axis as well. In this
way, the U.S. might accomplish its objectives in the Middle East, namely stabilizing the
Middle East to build a homeland free from terrorism, containing Iran and Russia malign
expansion, and preserving the economic interest based on natural resources.
3. The U.S. and the Kurds

This Chapter emphasizes the reasons why the U.S. strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis the Kurds is a policy which goes against the U.S. interests in the Middle East. The Kurds play a crucial role for the U.S. strategic interests in Syria and in the region as a whole. This is because (a) the Kurds are the only effective and resilient force in the Middle East the U.S can rely on, for which the U.S. has already spent a lot of resources in training and equipping the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds; (b) the Kurds are located in a strategic position for the containment of Iran and Russia; (c) the U.S. has lost leverage in the region, and its ambiguity towards the Kurds may be a barrier to establishing relations of trust; (d) the Kurds might act as a stabilizing force for the U.S. in Syria, as they were the only one able to maintain stability up to the present days; (e) the Kurds may ally with those forces that the U.S. seeks to contain, such as Russia and Iran, and worsen the crisis affecting the Middle East. We emphasize these latter reasons both by identifying the benefits and the limitations to an increased American support to the Kurds. Truly shifting the U.S. position of ambiguity vis-à-vis the Kurds is not easy. A strong support of the Kurds would undermine once and for all the U.S. strategic partnership with Iraq; at the same time, it would worsen the already-deteriorated alliance with Turkey, which is also NATO ally; and, more importantly, it may mean a proxy war with Iran and Russia in Syria. Even though the U.S. military capacity is much superior to that of Russia, an Arab world united by Russia would challenge U.S. interests in the Middle East as well as its national security. For the sake of completeness, we include into our discussion Israel and Russia, and NATO – amongst its members, France and
Turkey are the most relevant to our discussion. By doing so, we analyze the risks for the U.S. to lose the alliance with the Kurds to the benefit of Russia and Iran, because of its policy of strategic ambiguity. Despite this event is unlikely, it is still possible and, at least for the Kurds, desirable in light of their quest for independence. Russia, indeed, may be more supportive of the Kurdish issue than the U.S. has ever been. Russia has already supported the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum for independence in September 2017, and seriously improved its economic ties with the region. Despite taking part in the Turkish attacks of YPG in Afrin, it has also supported the YPG during the fight against ISIS, with no formal protest from Turkish President Erdogan (Tol, 2017).

This Russian support of the Kurds may be dangerous for the U.S. position in the Middle East as well as for NATO. While France urged it will probably enter Syria on the side of the Kurds, opposing Turkey’s invasion of Afrin, Russia may feel pressured by the presence of more than one NATO member in an area which is clearly under Russia’s sphere of influence (Irish & Pennetier, 2018). Therefore, Russia may respond – either directly or indirectly – and in this situation, the faction the Kurds will side with may determine the future of the U.S. in the Middle East. Indeed, we cannot take for granted that the Kurds would side with the U.S. against Russia. Russia, indeed, has probably become the most influential actor in Syria and the Middle East, and this is most probably the result of the U.S. pervasive policy of strategic ambiguity, which has made U.S. look untrustworthy in the eyes of many states in the Middle East (Geltzer, 2017). While improving its relations with the Kurds, Russia has cemented its influence in Syria and Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, therefore playing a very important role for the Kurdish future. By cementing its influence on those latter countries, Russia has assumed the position once occupied by the U.S. in the Middle East. This new Russian
position in the Middle East may challenge the U.S. position as the main ally of the Kurds; indeed, Russians “have asserted themselves as a credible alternative to the Americans with traditional U.S. allies.” (Cook, 2018)

This is also because the relations between the U.S. and the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds has been more complicated than what they appeared, mainly because of this Kurdish strive for independence. The U.S.-Kurdish relations has been characterized by “cooperation toward short-term US objectives”, lacking support to the Kurds’ objectives in the region (Romano et al., 2017, p.177). This lack of support of the Kurds has emerged so clearly that many scholars are of the opinion that the Kurds have been “repeatedly used” by the U.S. to accomplish its strategic goals while remaining ambiguous on its position towards them (Danilovich, 2016, p. 20). If we disregard for a moment the renewed Russian support of the Kurds, the U.S. position towards the Kurds becomes more comprehensible. The Kurds’ quest for independence has made of them a marginal actor in the Middle East (O’Leary, 2018, p.1). The Kurds are known to “have no friends but the mountains” and the U.S. is one of the few actors for them to rely on (Stern, 2017). Indeed, Kurdish interests are at odds with those of Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, which Russia might not be willing to disappoint. However, Assad has started to protect the Kurds as well from Turkey, and this might be a signal that Russia wants them in their game of alliance in the Middle East as well (“Friend or foe,” 2018). Therefore, the U.S. may not be willing to shift towards a less ambiguous policy because it does not perceive that this shift would constitute a necessary step to improve its position in the Middle East. Moreover, the U.S. may consider Russia’s support of this latter as a distraction aimed at disorienting the U.S. and expanding its influence. If this is the case, the
U.S. considers the Kurds as already, and inevitably, on its side, because of this marginal position they still hold in the region.

However, the Kurdish position in the Middle East is changing for real, and more and more countries are taking a pro-Kurdish stance, France alike. This is also because the whole world witnessed the effectiveness of Kurdish forces. Therefore, the U.S. should not be too confident about the Kurdish support, as the Kurds might be forced to ally with Russia even in the case they are not willing to. Russia is currently a more influential actor than the U.S. is in Syria and Iraq, and, despite difficult for the U.S. to accept, is in better relations with Turkey. Accepting an alliance with Russia may mean for the Kurds to obviate the risk of a mass extermination, which is likely to occur if the tensions in Afrin do not find a resolution and are extended to Iraq, which Turkey has already threatened of invasion if Peshmerga cross the borders (Zalla, 2018). In other words, the Kurds may decide to ally with their antagonists to preserve their security, given that the U.S. is remaining ambiguous. Therefore, the U.S. should act quickly, if it does not want to lose the advantages of a stronger alliance with the Kurds.

The best solution for the U.S. is probably that promoted by Israel, one of the few allies the U.S. has left in the Middle East. Israel is apparently backing a Sunni alliance and of the creation of a “Second Israel” out of the KRG and Rojava as well (Baker, 2017). This “Second Israel” aims to contain Iran, whose support of Hezbollah passes through Syria. A Sunni alliance backed by Israel and the U.S., which is inclusive of the Kurds, would particularly benefit U.S. interests in the Middle East. Therefore, it would be risky for the U.S. to continue its policy of strategic ambiguity, because it may lose the Kurds as a potential alliance.
Pros and cons of a U.S. increased support of the Kurds

If the U.S. loses the Kurds, it may lose the only effective force it can rely on in Syria and in the Middle East more in general. The YPG and the Peshmerga have proved to be an extremely loyal and serious partner for the U.S., also given the cohesiveness and discipline characterizing their groups. Moreover, the U.S. has already spent a significant amount of its national security budget for the Kurds. For the year 2018, the U.S. has set a budget to be spent for the YPG alone of 500 million dollars (Ford, 2018). The U.S. has provided the Kurds with weapons, training, and logistical assistance. Despite these financial and logistical efforts by the U.S., the U.S. may still decide to favor its strategic partnerships with Turkey and Iraq over that with the Kurds, also to avoid a further escalation of the tensions in Syria.

However, Turkey has already proved to be an untrustworthy ally. Reports revealed that during the fight against Daesh, Turkey has supported, trained, and armed ISIS and Al Qaeda’s militants in Syria. This was also the reason why the U.S. coalition forces, part of the Global Coalition against Daesh, started to support the YPG in Syria (Kirmanj, 2018). Still, Turkey continued to play an important role in the balance of power of the Middle East, as it used to be one of the most effective force NATO could rely on in the region. Nowadays, in the aftermath of the Turkish coup and the consequent purges of the military, Turkish militias and security “are a shadow of their former self” (Rubin, 2018). While Turkish forces are not the ones they used to be, the YPG has continued to prove its value on field. The YPG has managed to eradicate ISIS and its affiliated groups30 from the Syria, therefore destroying the caliphate’s safe heaven. The Kurds managed to accomplish this difficult mission almost completely by themselves. As a matter of fact, “for years, they operated alone” in Syria, while being “ignored by the U.S. and Russia” as well as “isolated” by Syrian opposition groups, and
“embargoed by Turkey” (Rubin, 2018). The YPG’s ability to carry out anti-terrorist operations without receiving a strong support by other important actors in Syria and the Middle East proved to the U.S. that Kurdish forces are probably comparable to their Turkish counterpart. The U.S. should rely on Kurdish forces more than it does on Turkish forces. Turkish forces are considered as more organized and effective than those of the Kurds. However, this might be a mistake. The decimation of Turkish military due to Erdogan’s purges has seriously affected Turkish army’s effectiveness, and Turkish affiliation with Hamas$^{31}$, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda should distance – just in part – the U.S. from Turkey.

In a similar way to that of Turkey, Iraqi forces proved unreliable. Moreover, they also proved ineffective. In 2014, the Iraqi military, in which the U.S. had invested 24 billion dollars, was defeated by less than 15,000 ISIS militias in Mosul in six days (Glickman, 2014, p.1). The country became divided in three spheres of influence: a Kurdish-dominated area in Northern Iraq, an Iraqi-dominated area in the South, and the ISIS caliphate in between the two. Despite ISIS had managed to seize an important territory in Iraq, Kurdish Peshmerga managed to stop ISIS military advance into Northern Iraq. Peshmerga were numerically inferior than ISIS troops, but well organized. They not only managed to stop ISIS advance, but paved the way to the liberation of Mosul from ISIS in 2017.

In other words, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds were fundamental in “shrinking the safe haven ISIS once enjoyed”, therefore contributing to preserve not only U.S. national security, but the Western world national security (Geltzer, 2017). The People’s Protection Unit and the Peshmerga proved much more competent and reliable than the Arab forces involved in the operations, for which the U.S. reportedly “lost” more than 500 million dollars (Kirmanj, 2018). In other words, the Kurdish forces and the U.S. managed to achieve very important
objectives together, and the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds proved capable of carrying out complex
tasks. Both Iraq and Turkey proved unable to accomplish the same objectives, with this latter
even closer to undermine the Global Coalition’s efforts. Therefore, while the U.S. should not
openly oppose Turkey and Iraq, it should provide a more robust support of the Kurds. While
avoiding promoting Kurdish independence, the U.S. may take advantage of the geostrategic
position of the Kurdish territory, replacing Turkey and Iraq’s roles in U.S. policy of
containment of Iran to the Kurds. The Kurds would be forced to accept because of their
constant need for protection, which the U.S. can assure them, while exploiting the
effectiveness of their forces and of their geo-strategic position.

As a matter of fact, the partnerships between the U.S. and Turkey and the U.S. and
Iraq were originally established to contain Iran’s influence as well as that of a political Shia.
In the case of Turkey, the country was supposed to contain Russia’s influence as well –
particularly during the Cold War (Kirmanj, 2018; Barron & Barnes, 2018, p.1). Turkey is
located in a prime geo-strategic position to contain Iran and Russia’s expanding influence,
currently pushing farther into the Middle East and the European Union. In other words,
Turkey can act as a buffer zone, protecting both NATO and U.S. interests in the Middle East.
However, as we mentioned before, Turkey has not truly promoted U.S. interests in the region,
but rather has played against them, at least in the last decade.

For what concerns Iraq, the U.S. interest in preserving a “unified, stable, and
democratic” Iraq came as the result of U.S. policy of dual containment of Iran and Iraqi Shias
(US Department of State, 2017; O’Leary, 2018, p.2). The establishment of a strong
government in Baghdad aimed to push back the Iranian influence over Iraqi Shias. However,
the government in Baghdad has always been fragmented, notwithstanding U.S attempts to
democratize the country during the post-Saddam reconstruction period, which lasted until 2011. Iraqi sovereignty has been “divided between Kurds in Erbil, Sunni Arabs in Mosul, and Shia in Baghdad”, and result in the “unstable, dangerous, and transformative” situation that characterizes the country today (Stansfield & Shareef, 2017, p. 281). While Iraq ranks eleventh out of 178 states in the “Fragile State Index”, the area under the Kurdish Regional Government’s jurisdiction appears as a separate, more democratic, organized, and stable reality (2018). Despite the conflict against ISIS and the economic halt that followed, Northern Iraq is still considered as a prosperous area of the Middle East.

The same scenario applies to Syria and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) – a self-declared and autonomous region in Northern Syria – and particularly to the Syrian-Kurdish area of Rojava. While the Syrian central government is weak, and the organization of the state is chaotic, Rojava and the Kurds give hope to the world that a new democratic future in Syria might still be possible. This Kurdish objective is also known as the Rojava revolution which consists in the establishment of a system promoting direct democracy and women’s right. Syria’s North-Eastern corner, where Rojava is situated, is becoming more and more contiguous – with the Kurdish Regional Government. This territory, thanks to its prime geo-strategic position, may replace the role of Turkey and Iraq in the monitoring of Iranian expansions as well as the results of the war on terror (See Table 4).

If the U.S. was able to leave behind strategic ambiguity, it could establish a new area of containment of Iran and Russia, form where it could monitor the situation with the various terrorist groups present in Syria and in the Middle Eastern region more in general. This area should correspond to the Syrian Rojava and the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government, where a fresh wave of democratization – more in line with U.S. values and mission in the world – is
taking place. Turkey and Iraq would be reluctant to accept the establishment of such area; therefore, the way the U.S. would implement such measure would be extremely important. Despite the U.S. may not be willing to leave behind alliances with Turkey and Iraq, its strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds as well as Turkey and Iraq have given U.S. a marginal position in Syria and in the Middle East more in general, a region which is increasingly characterized by a deep and pervasive anti-Americanism, namely the opposition to U.S. foreign policy actions as well as to American values and lifestyle.

The pervasive anti-Americanism characterizing Syria and the Middle East is the result of some questionable actions by the U.S. in the Middle East. The most disputed of those is probably the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. However, U.S. inability to topple the Assad regime in Syria, and its policy of strategic ambiguity vis à vis the Kurds, Turkey, and Iraq, have also contributed to triggering, once again, anti-American sentiments which had been quiescent since President Barack Obama entered office in 2009. Trump’s recent decertification of the Iran nuclear deal, and its willingness to start a new policy aimed at countering Iran have made people doubt the trustworthiness of the U.S. Indeed, the U.S. continues to pull-in and out of deals. This fact, together with its frequent changes of direction with its allies and allows neither its allies nor its enemies to predict what the U.S. actions will be. Moreover, U.S strategic ambiguity, which has been parallel to a gradual disengagement\textsuperscript{33} of the U.S. from the Middle East seemed to have turned in a no-strategy policy for the Middle East. All these factors analyzed together contribute to an increased uncertainty of the international arena over U.S. intentions, which in turn has lost its leverage at the negotiating tables. However, building a strong network of alliances in the Middle East which is also inclusive of the Kurds—an alliance should not be supportive of the Kurdish independence, but rather of their security—
may be beneficial to the U.S. image in the Middle East. The prime objective of such network of alliance would consist in defending the homeland rather than promoting a policy of aggression of U.S. antagonists in the Middle East. Moreover, it would mark a shift away from strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds. On the contrary, strategic ambiguity should be applied to Turkey and Iraq. Indeed, both of them have proved ineffective and untrustworthy; at the same time, a rudimentary relation with both of them is worth preserving, so to avoid any direct confrontation arising from taking a too strong stance in favor of the Kurds or any other of their regional enemies. In other words, playing the same game Turkey and Iraq have played with the U.S. while renewing their relations with Russia and Iran would allow the U.S. to ensure a greater Middle Eastern stability. This stability can only be achieved if the Kurds become active participants in this game of alliances. In this way, the U.S. may also monitor the results of the war against terror, and the situation within the Syrian borders, therefore ensuring the preservation of a homeland free from terrorism.

The establishment of a strategic network of alliances for the U.S. would include Arab Sunni forces – the Sunnis of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and UAE– Israel, and the Kurds. Such alliance would take advantage of the strategic position where the Kurds are located and would contain Iranian expansion as well as Turkish one. Such alliance, therefore, should stream in the establishment of a buffer area corresponding to the KRG area and Rojava, facilitated by NATO members –also seen French interests in protecting the YPG. The reasons behind the decision to establish this buffer area may be justified with the need for stabilization of Syria, instead with a U.S. open support of the Kurds. Such buffer area would ensure the Kurds the preservation of their security, and the actual stabilization of the region, above all of Syria. Indeed, the Kurds were able to create a safe oasis in the desert of destruction, which is today’s
Syria. Moreover, in such buffer area, the Kurds would benefit from the protection coming from the U.S., NATO and the Arab world, obviating the risk to their security. If this is the scenario the U.S. should expect a reaction from Russia and Iran, which however are not yet ready – not enough military capable at the moment – to confront an alliance between U.S., Israel and the Kurds – as well as other NATO troops. Moreover, the U.S. let Russia and Iran took over Syria for too long to renounce to such opportunity. If the U.S. does not follow this path, the risk is, even though it may look like a remote possibility, that the Kurds will decide to side with Iran and Russia. This would be mainly aimed to avoid a Turkish purge of Kurds, above all in case the U.S. continues to apply strategic ambiguity towards these latter. Moreover, Russian support to the Kurdish quest for independence might deceive the Kurds and push them to follow Russia. That if this is the scenario, one of the U.S. closest allies in the Middle East, Israel, would lose its position as hegemon in the region, which is already deteriorating because of Iranian expanding influence. Therefore, the Kurds may be a solution to both the U.S. and Israel’s problems and objectives.

**Israel and the Kurds**

The Kurds “have no friends but the mountains” and Israel (Stern, 2017). Indeed, Israel has backed the Syrian militias during the fight against Daesh as well as supported the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum for independence. Israel’s position towards the Syrian Kurds has been that of an ally also because the Kurds are enemies to most of Israel enemies, namely Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq (Baker, 2017). In Syria, the Assad regime has not shifted its anti-Israel position – quite shared by the rest of Shia countries – and depends on Iran and Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah’s influence are growing at a very fast pace on Israel’s border, and Israel’s
needs to respond as quickly as possible (Baker, 2017). For what concerns Turkey, its ties with Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS and the renewed closeness to Iran, worries Israel. Israel is seeking to reaffirm its hegemony in the region once and for all, which is constantly threatened by Turkey and Israel. The Iraqi-Kurdish KRG and the Syrian Kurdish Rojava, and their militias have built a “uniquely viable entity amid the surrounding bedlam” (Baker, 2017). Iraqi Kurds in particular, has been so close to Israel that the international public opinion started to speculate that Israel wanted to craft a ‘second Israel’ out of Iraqi-Kurdistan (Iraqi VP warns 2017). This ‘second Israel” would aim to undermine Turkish and Iraqi interest in the region, at least, according to Turkish far-right political groups, such as the Homeland Party (Surkes, 2017). For these Turkish groups, Israeli support of an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan – namely the area corresponding to the Kurdish regional government – constitutes “a declaration of war by U.S. imperialism and Israeli Zionism against countries in the region.” (Surkes, 2017) This view supports, once again, the theory that Turkey, Iran, Iraq may ally, backed by Russia, against a Sunni alliance backed by the U.S. and Israel. On the other hand, it also supports the establishment of a buffer area out of Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish regions, which may become an area of U.S. containment of Iran and Russia, replacing Iraq and Turkey (O’Leary, 2018, p.2). However, the Kurds and their renewed ties with Russia may destroy Israeli plan, to the detriment of the U.S. interests as well.

Russia and the Kurds

Despite Russia is certainly closer to the Syrian government than to the Syrian Kurds, Russia has grown supportive of the Kurds. While backing Turkish attacks on the Syrian
Kurds, Russia has also supported the YPG during the fight against ISIS. When Russia did so, however, Turkey did not protest (Tol, 2017). More importantly, Russia has been establishing a strategic partnership with Iraqi Kurds, a move that should worry the United States. This Russian move is probably due to the presence of important oilfields in the Kurdish region. While the U.S. is less and less interested in the natural resources of the Middle East, the Russian oil company Rosneft purchased the most important Iraqi-Kurdish pipeline, the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline (See Figure 3b), right after the Kurdish referendum for independence (Zhdannikov, 2018). In that occasion, the head of Rosneft, Igor Sechin, reaffirmed to Baghdad – a country which highly relies on its oil revenues – his willingness to reinforce a strategic partnership with the Kurds of Iraq (Zhdannikov, 2018). This move made of Russia a central actor in the Persian Gulf, a mediator between Iraqi and the Iraqi Kurds – in an area under U.S. sphere of influence. Indeed, this economic move aimed to consolidate Moscow’s influence in Iraq, as it had already cemented its influence in Syria and its alliance with the Assad regime (Zhdannikov, 2018). Russia aims at isolating the U.S. in the Middle East, and, by joining forces with Turkey, at destroying NATO and its alliances from within. Strategic ambiguity policy – which looks more and more as a no-strategy policy – distances U.S. from the Kurds, and allows Russia to play its game. This game is reversing the U.S. strategy of enlarging NATO in areas close to the borders of Russia, and it is ironically doing it by using one of the NATO members which has historically contributed to the containment of Russia, Turkey.
Turkey and the Kurds

Turkey is not only carrying out purges of the Kurds in Afrin, but has threatened Iraq of invasion in case Peshmerga manage to cross the borders, and was ready to attack those latter in the aftermath of the KRG referendum for independence occurred on September 25th 2017. When the Iraqi Kurds decided to hold the referendum for independence by the end of 2017, President Erdogan did not hesitate to support Iranian-Iraqi led attacks of the Peshmerga in Kirkuk. Right before the referendum for independence of Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) took place, the Turkish government reunited to hold an emergency vote against this latter (Cupolo, 2017). The vote allowed for mandate to deploy Turkish troop in Iraq (and Syria) in case the referendum won (Cupolo, 2017). The reason why this decision was taken was very well explained by Can Acun, a pro-government researcher living in Ankara, who said: “in the long-term, this [referendum] could be the starting point for a larger, united Kurdistan. […] That is why Turkey could sacrifice its economic gains to prevent the establishment of a greater Kurdistan” (Cupolo, 2017). Indeed, the Syrian Kurds as well had already gained autonomy in 2012, through the establishment of the autonomous region of Rojava – part of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). If the Iraqi Kurds were to gain independence, the Syrian Kurds would eventually follow. Therefore, Turkey was ready to take part in the conflict and side with Iran, also because, in President Erdogan’s view, the U.S. could not support a group so firmly against Turkish national interests. Moreover, Erdogan started campaigning for the U.S to remove their support of the Syrian Kurds. The U.S., however, ignored Turkish complaints, and continued its ambiguous policy, being both a close ally of Turkey and of the Kurds until the Turkish-Kurdish conflict broke out.
In Syria, Turkey started to attack the Syrian Kurds in an operation dubbed as Operation Olive Branch, aiming to neutralize Syrian Kurdish fighters. The operation was the result of Ankara’s mounting anger against the U.S, which did not stop arming the People’s Protection Unit as it pledged (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018). Turkey, which it considers as an extension of the PPK – the Kurdish Worker’s party – responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in Turkey, considered U.S. ambiguity as a clear betrayal of the Turkish-American longstanding alliance. Turkey threatened U.S. of an “Ottoman Slap” – an ancient Turkish-Ottoman practice during war – if they interfered with the Turkish operation, which was backed and controlled by Russia (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018). Russia support of the operation, together with Turkey’s purchase of a “Russian air defense system” deteriorated the Turkish position as a NATO ally (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018).

**NATO and the Kurds**

Another NATO member, however, is supporting the Kurds. President of France Emmanuel Macron is supporting the Syrian Kurds and has pledged to intervene in their favor if Turkish attacks do not cease. France here constitutes another important actor: if it enters the game for real, Russia may feel pressured by the presence of more than one NATO ally in Syria. NATO – the U.S., the U.K., and France – has already attacked the Syrian regime for its use of chemical weapons, an attack which was technically illegal under international law. As a matter of fact, the use of chemical weapons has not yet been proved. If France entered Rojava, both the U.S. – through CENTCOM – and France would be in a territory which is clearly under Russian sphere of influence, and characterized by the presence of Russian
proxies. If they hit the wrong target, therefore, Russia may and probably will respond, despite not directly. Indeed, President Trump and President Putin seem to be in a too good relation for Russia to respond too harshly. However, way Russia may respond is by now unpredictable in its magnitude, and this constitutes another reason why the Kurds may prove key actors for the U.S., as they might join forces with France and the U.S. contain the threat of Russia and Iran presence in Syria. The most likely event would be a proxy war between NATO and Russia in Syria; however, the degree to which this event might extend and affect the world as a whole is unpredictable.

Conclusions

Strategic ambiguity allowed Turkey to attack the YPG in Syria, as well as Baghdad and Tehran to attack the Kurds in Kirkuk, and Russia to assume the position in the region which used to be U.S. one. The U.S. showed that it is leaning towards Iraq and Turkey rather than the Kurds, whom it left alone. However, other NATO members have not, and have threatened to enter Rojava if Turkish massacre of the Kurds continues. Moreover, the U.S. gave an enormous advantage to Iran in Syria – but also in Iraq – to the detriment of another of its allies’ interests, Israel. While Israel is known to be the closest ally of the U.S. in the Middle East, Russia’s closeness to the Kurds should frighten the U.S. Russia, indeed, may be better off at adhering to supporting the Kurds in their long-term objectives. Russia may convince the Kurds to side with an Iran-Russia-Iraq alliance by using as bargaining chip the Kurdish independence, or their security as a population as a whole.
4. **Shifting U.S. Foreign Policy vis à vis the Kurds**

This chapter advocates for the shift in the current U.S. policy position of strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds, given the premises in chapter 1 and two. The U.S. is faced with three alternatives when selecting its line of actions towards the Kurds. The U.S. may decide to (a) provide a strong support of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds; (b) provide a mild – intended as preserving their security without promoting their independence – support of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds; (c) provide no support of the Kurds at all. In proposing these alternatives, we show both the best-case scenario the U.S can hope for in the Middle East and the worst-case scenario. The best-case scenario is, in reality, the least worst, namely avoiding any direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, and/or a proxy war between American and Israeli proxies on one side, and Russian and Iranian proxies on the other.

**A strong U.S. support of the Kurds**

An American strong support of the Kurds would include officially ally with the Kurds and promoting its interests, and therefore openly and actively promoting Kurdish quest for independence. While the Kurdish territory of Iraq and Syria may be used as an area of containment of Iran and Russia, such decision would be too strong for the moment being and destabilize the Middle East even more. This would also mean entering – an indirect – confrontation with Turkey, without stopping the fight between two key U.S. ally, Turkey and the Kurds. Even though the former has acted as untrustworthy, it is still useful for U.S. interests in the region.
Moreover, while Turkey does not hold at its disposal the same U.S. military capacity to enter any direct confrontation with the U.S. if this is the case, Turkey’s alignment with Iran and Russia – which has already occurred at least in part is dangerous for U.S. and NATO interests as well. Indeed, Turkey is also a NATO ally, which complicates the matter. Indeed, a confrontation – of any kind – between Turkey and the U.S. – and/or France, if this latter enters Rojava – would undermine NATO alliance, therefore accomplishing one of Russia’s main foreign policy objectives. Indeed, Russia aims to weaken NATO’s influence in the Middle East and in the world more in general. Russia is gradually achieving its objective, also given that Trump’s de-certification of Iran’s nuclear deal has probably left no door open to U.S. to improve its relations with Iran nor the U.S. can improve relations with the Assad regime.

A too open support of the Kurds would mean for U.S. to enter confrontation with Iran and Syria as well. As a matter of fact, Iran and Syria are two of the countries with the most consistent presence of Kurds (See Table 3). If the U.S. starts to provide the Kurds with a strong support in the region and in the international arena, the Kurds of Iran – who are currently living in a state of oppression – may revolt as well, which is also why Iran has attacked, together with Iraq, Iraqi Kurds in Kirkuk. In that occasion, the Iranian-Iraqi coalition was sending a signal to the Kurds: either they had stopped pursuing their quest for independence, or war would have been likely. This occurred because of the international support received by the Kurds during the fight against ISIS, which shifted Kurdish position in the Middle East, making of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds very powerful actors. In other words, a strong support of the Kurds coming from the U.S. would undermine Iranian sovereignty, which would be pushed to react. For the same reason, the U.S. would compromise its
strategic partnership with Iraq, whose sovereignty in within its borders would be once again deteriorated (U.S. relations with Iraq). Even though Iraq is not as a reliable – seen the growing ties with Iran and Russia – and effective partner as the Kurds are, the U.S. should not feed the Iranian-Russian coalition with any other alliance. Moreover, a strong alliance with the Kurds would also undermine the already difficult relations with Assad as well, despite this latter is currently protecting the Kurds from a Turkish massacre (“Friend or foe,” 2018). As a matter of fact, Syria is too divided already and its sovereignty too deteriorated to be able to accept such American move.

**A mild U.S. support of the Kurds**

Another option for the U.S. is to support the Kurds moderately. Such alternative would prioritize stopping the conflict in Afrin as well as the Turkish military that is currently moving towards Manbij. For the U.S., indeed, it is not convenient that two of its allies are fighting each other. Despite Turkey has not proved as trustworthy as the Kurds did, the U.S. have more interests in preserving this alliance than in leaving it behind. As a matter of fact, Turkey’s fighting against the Kurds would only give an advantage to Iran and the Assad regime in the region, helping Russia expanding its influence as well. Moreover, such Turkish move underlines NATO alliance. To stop the fighting in Afrin, an ad-hoc panel leading new negotiations between the U.S., Turkey – and, in a second moment, with the Syrian Kurds if possible, may help Turkey and the U.S. re-align their interests, which are many.

First of all, both the U.S. and Turkey have interests in resisting Iran. As a matter of fact, the U.S. has been historically far – at least since the end of the Cold war – from Iran. Turkey, in the same way as the U.S., does not share interests in empowering Iran, with which
it fights for the hegemony of the region. Iranian expansion actually undermines Turkish security and interests in the region as a whole (Jeffrey & Pollock, 2018). Moreover, Turkey would not be playing a leading role in the alliance between Iran and Russia. While the U.S. cannot trust Turkey anymore, the importance of Turkey for NATO and European interests plays a role too; as a result, Turkey would be more of a key actor remaining aligned with U.S. rather than the opposite way. By ensuring Turkey that the Kurds would not undermine their security, Turkey may be willing to collaborate with the Kurds and find a way to stabilize Syria, so to remove the threat of Iranian and Israeli proxies in the same area (Gibbons-Neff et al., 2018). This may be possible only if the U.S. is able to encourage the YPG to distance themselves from the PKK, and if the Iraqi Kurds manage to re-establish the economic ties before the Turkish coup d’état, occurred on July 15th, 2016 (Jeffrey & Pollock, 2018).

A mild support of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds would allow the U.S. to ensure Kurdish protection, at the same time establishing an informal buffer area out of Rojava and the KRG, with the aim to contain Iranian and Russian expansion. These two countries and their proxies are increasingly present in Syria, and at odds with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Such buffer area would be able to monitor the results of the fight against ISIS, as well as other terrorist cells, and the traffic of weapons between Iran and Hezbollah. This area may be useful also in term of stabilizing Syria and monitor such stabilization, without undermining NATO alliance, and by forming a new Sunni alliance which is inclusive of Israel and the Kurds—which may be helpful to stabilize Syria as well. The stabilization of Syria is not feasible if Iran does not have a valid reason to freeze tensions with both the U.S. and Israel. If Turkey, the U.S., and the Kurds are on the same page together with Israel and Saudi Arabia this may avoid the
escalation of tensions in Syria – even though a collaboration between Israel and Turkey is difficult to figure. However, this constitutes the best – least worst – possible scenario.

In this scenario, a mild support of the Kurds would, therefore, lead to the establishment of a network of strategic defense alliances, inclusive of NATO. These alliances would aim to engage the U.S. and its (new) allies in the Middle East into a strategy of defense, which preserve main U.S. interests in the region. If this is the case, the U.S. should shift away – at least partially – from strategic ambiguity towards the Kurds and towards all of its allies in the Middle East, so to be able to establish strong alliances.

**No support of the Kurds**

However, if the U.S. continues to deny its support to the Kurds, perpetuating the policy of strategic ambiguity, it may risk losing the Kurds as reliable ally to the benefit of Russia and to the detriment of its interests in the Middle East. They may still not accept to ally with Russia and Iran, but at the same time the relations between the U.S. and the Kurds would be deteriorated, and the Kurds might use this renewed support by Russia to raise the stakes if the U.S. needs their help. Turkey may return to its strong alliance with the U.S., but Turkey is not a trustworthy ally anymore, and its closeness to Iran and Russia constitutes a too big risk for the U.S. to take. If Turkey does not decide on restoring relations with the U.S., the U.S. may find itself alone with Israel – and maybe Saudi Arabia – in Syria, with Iran and Israel which may fight each other. Therefore, the U.S. would be left alone with Israel in a powder keg, and Israel and Iran may decide to fight each other. In this way, a proxy war in Syria would start, destabilizing Syria and the whole Middle Eastern region once again and endangering an American safe homeland as well. If the U.S. continues its policy of strategic
ambiguity, it will not regain the leverage lost any time soon, and a Shia Arab world united by Russia constitutes a main threat for the U.S., NATO and its allies in the Middle East.

5. Conclusions

The U.S. cannot leave the Kurds behind, because it would give a too strong advantage to Iran and Russia. The best solution for the U.S. would be to provide the Kurds with a mild support and counter the Shia alliance which Russia has promoted with a Sunni alliance which it leads and is inclusive of both the Kurds and Israel. Many prominent figures in U.S. public opinion, from former secretary of state John Kerry, to former U.S. army General Raymond Odierno, to politicians such as Nikki Haley have expressed their support of the Kurds. The public opinion has been nonetheless supportive of the Kurds and their independence. These opinions matter and have to be partly taken into account when taking decisions in foreign policy (Knights & Pollock, 2017).

Caring too much about public opinion has led to disastrous consequences for the U.S., such as the Iraq’s invasion, and the inaction in Syria which has led to the present situation. However, forgetting about what other members inside of a community think does not lead to better results. While the United States plays ambiguously, Arab and Iranian media “are already interpreting the latest military movements as a clear victory for the Islamic Republic and its Shia allies” (Knights & Pollock, 2018). In other words, the ambiguity of U.S. foreign policy-making is already making the United States appear weaker and, despite the U.S. military capacity is greater than any other state on earth, military capacity is not everything. If a whole region turns against the U.S., the U.S. position deteriorates, no matter what. The U.S.
has lost its leverage in not only in the Middle East, but also in Asia, and partly in Europe. The U.S. is not taken seriously as it used to be, and a pervasive sense of anti-Americanism now characterizes the Middle East and the world in general. This is not only a threat to U.S. interests, but a threat to the stability of the whole world, to *pax Americana* – namely the status of perpetual peace in most of the world granted by the (super) power of the U.S., which has apparently come to an end. The current situation in the Middle East is a powder keg for the whole world’s stability. The U.S. is the only country military capable of countering such threat. However, the U.S. administration would probably continue on a policy of no support of the Kurds.
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The apple of discord between Turkey and U.S. was American military officials’ decision “to train a 30,000-strong border security force” (Sloat, 2018). This border security mostly involved YPG soldiers to be deployed along the Turkish border (Sloat, 2018). As predictable, Turkey rebelled against this decision, and Secretary of State Tillerson was forced to remark that “some people misspoke”, and that U.S. only intention was “to ensure that local elements are providing security to liberated areas” (Sloat, 2018). Disregarding Tillerson’s declaration, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch in Northwest Syria, backed by Russia. From that moment on, the U.S. and Turkey’s relationships have been strained, and, despite both parties engaged in talks, no solution has yet been found. The U.S inaction allowed Turkey, one of its historical ally and a member of NATO, to threaten invasion of Iraq as well in case the Peshmerga cross the borders and enter Syria to support the YPG. Turkey has created cross-border issues with Iraq as well, to discount the option that Peshmerga would enter Syria and join forces with the YPG. President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened invasion of Iraq, and, following his threats Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi pledged to prevent military attacks by Peshmerga in Syria.

The name is evocative of President Ronald Regan’s 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative, a “research-and-development program” which aimed to “explore largely space-based means of detecting, intercepting, and destroying strategic nuclear missiles launched by the Soviet Union” (Kilgo, 2010). Despite far from suggesting a nuclear program, we are stressing that U.S. strategic alliances in the Middle East should focus on the research...
and development of a defensive strategy aimed at countering any possible break out of violence against U.S. interests in the Middle East and at protecting U.S. homeland.

9 For the purpose of framing this paper better we are not referring to the existing alliance between Russia, Iran and China, also known as troika. However, it is important to notice that if Russia manages – together with Iran – to unite the Arab world against the U.S. and its regional allies, such alliance would be backed by China as well. Despite we know that Russia and China display a lower military capacity than that of the U.S., technology and poor access to information about their security programs have been leading scholar to think that in a direct or indirect confrontation with Russia and China, the triumph of the U.S. and NATO should not be taken for granted (Daniels, 2017).

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The U.S. can rely on the proximity of most NATO allies to the Middle East. However, the U.S. is in need of actors in the Middle East which can make U.S. presence in the Middle East sustainable.

A group whose beliefs resemble those of Shia Islam – they were originally considered a confession separate from Shia Islam – which is present in Syria. In past, they constituted “the weakest, poorest, most rural, most despised and most backward people of Syria”; today, they are the minority in control Syrian regime, led by Bashar al-Assad (Pipes, 1982, p. 429).

Despite joining the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013, Assad has repeatedly used chemical weapons against the Syrian population from 2011 up to the present days (Sen, 2018).

13 The official names of the ruling body of the autonomous Kurdish region in Northern Iraq and Northern Syria. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established in 1992 by the Kurdistan National Assembly, and constituted the first democratically elected parliament in Kurdistan and Iraq (Kurdish Regional Government, 2017). The Rojava, included in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), is a self-proclaimed autonomous territory which the Syrian Kurds took over in 2012, during the fight against ISIS (Learn About Rojava, 2015). Both territories constituted two of the main frontlines of the Global Coalition fight against Daesh.

The conflict in Syria includes: the Turkish-Kurdish conflict; the conflict between rebels – which includes ISIS – and the Assad Regime; the U.S. conflict with terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda; and the Iranian-Israeli conflict. In Syria, Iranian and Russian proxies threaten U.S. army and interests as well.

15 The U.S. is shifting its economic interests towards Asia (Barron & Barnes, 2018, p.2). This is not to say that U.S. does not hold economic interests in the Middle East, as oil is still important in U.S. foreign policy, having become the U.S. main oil exporter in the world. However, given the events occurring in the Middle East, the economic interests, despite probably being the ones driving the instability of the region, are not as paramount as they used to be.

16 When the U.S. left Iraq, civil war between Shia and Sunni Iraqis, as well as in-between the Kurds themselves began. When ISIS entered Iraq, Baghdad controlled the regions in the Center and South, the Kurds controlled the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the North, and the Islamic State controlled Mosul.

17 The conflict in Syria broke out in 2011 as a result of a widespread protest for democratization in the Middle East also known as the Arab Springs. From protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the clashes became an internationalized conflict (Barron & Barnes, 2018, p.1). The power vacuum that U.S. left open in Syria in the last seven years have allowed new actors, policy and tools to gain influence to the detriment of U.S.

18 Removing the Assad regime and establishing a democracy would mean for the Shia minority to lose control over the country to the benefit of the Sunni majority. This is also the reason why the Alawites regime has always been oppressive towards the Sunni majority. The removal of Assad would therefore pave the way for a Sunni-perpetrated genocide of the Alawites, which would overlap with the existing multiple wars of Syria – the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the fight against ISIS, the regime fight against the rebels, to name the most important – and worsen the already dramatic conditions of Syria and the Syrians.


20 Under this perspective, Turkish protests look more like a pretext to distance itself from the U.S. and finally align with the Kremlin

21 The capital of Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraq respectively. Iraq and the Kudish Regional Government have been fighting for sovereignty over some areas, the governorates of Kirkuk, Khanaqin, and Sinjar being the most important.
Baghdad that it will invest billions of dollars in Kurdistan, to the detriment of Iraq, a state which is already too high in interest in expanding strategic cooperation” (Zhdannikov, 2018). In other words, Rosneft would instead do business with the Kurdish Regional Government, since it showed “a higher interest in expanding strategic cooperation” (Zhdannikov, 2018). In other words, Rosneft informed Baghdad that it will invest billions of dollars in Kurdistan, to the detriment of Iraq, a state which is already too

22 Members of ISIS fled the country and entered Turkey. Those who did not, managed to re-organize forces because the YPG, which was fighting to neutralize the nucleases of ISIS left in Eastern Syria, were forced to return to the North of Syria and contain Turkish attacks.

23 Turkey is a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) ally. While its mission aims to preserve security, NATO’s identity is both political and military. For what concerns its military identity, “NATO is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes”, and if, only if diplomatic efforts fail “it has the military power to undertake crisis-management operations” (What is NATO, 2018). These operations are carried out in accordance to the collective defence clause enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty or “under a United Nations mandate alone” (What is NATO, 2018).

24 Turkey started to rely on Iraqi-Kurdish oil. KRG policy involved entering into explorative agreements with the “U.S.-based ExxonMobil and Chevron and moving ahead with an energy partnership with neighboring Turkey involving the construction of direct pipelines across their shared border” (Park, 2014, p.v). As a result, Baghdad resented Turkish position these energy-policy developments, which added to the already existing tensions between Iraq and Turkey (Park, 2014, p.v). The Kirkuk-Ceyhan Pipeline was eventually re-built on the model of a previous one, and as of 2014 is working.

25 Kurdish strives for independence.

26 Member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. According to Art.5 of the Washington Treaty, an attack against one member of NATO is an attack against all. However, Turkey has already worsened its NATO membership for a series of different reasons. One, above all, is related to its threats of retaliation against France, if this latter decides to enter the games in Syria to protect the Syrian Kurds (Gumrukcu, 2018).

27 So far, we have focused on the U.S. alliances in the Middle East as a matter of U.S. national interest. We are now including those actors which are relevant in U.S. decision to support the Kurds, such as NATO, which is represented by France, U.S. and Turkey in our discussion.

28 As we previously mentioned, Turkey has threatened Iraq of invasion in case it is not able to contain Peshmerga crossing the border to help the YPG. If this is the case, Iraq may resort to the use of force against Iraqi Kurds, and together with Iran – where the Kurdish population has started to revolt as well – might re-create a similar situation to the genocide perpetrated against Iraqi Kurds during Saddam Hussein regime, the Al-Anfal genocide. In other words, the more the Kurds wait for the U.S. to shift its position, the more they are at a higher risk of being exterminated (Zalla, 2018).

29 We use the word ‘allies’, but we already saw that the U.S. has few real and trustworthy alliances in the Middle East because of strategic ambiguity (See Chapter I). Israel is one of them, the closest actor to the U.S. in the Middle East.

30 Al-Qaeda being one of them. Al Qaeda is the umbrella terrorist organization that planned and carried out the attacks of September 11, 2001. Osama bin Laden formed Al Qaeda in May 1988, near the end of the Afghan-Soviet War, from the Mujahideen Services Bureau (Atkins & Atkins, 2011).

31 “Activist wing of the Muslim Brotherhood regarded as a terrorist organization in the Middle East.” Palestinian terrorist and fundamentalist organization, inspired by Sunni-Islam and based in Gaza (“Hamas,” 2016).

32 The relative stability of the Kurdish region “has allowed the Iraqi Kurds to enjoy the country’s highest living standard and highest level of foreign investment” (Hadji, 2015, p.516). For instance, violence rates in the Kurdish region are much lower compared to those of Iraq (U.S. Dept. Of Defense in Hadji, 2015, p.516).

33 The abandonment of a proper foreign policy strategy in the Middle East also due to the shift of focus in U.S. foreign policy from the Middle East to Asia.

34 Kirkuk is one of the contested regions between Iraq and Iraqi-Kurds. This region is contested because rich in oilfields and constitute the primary source of tensions between Arabs and Kurds, especially after the U.S withdrawal from the country in December 2011.

35 The KRG exports oil though this pipeline, earning on average 600 million dollars per month (Stratfor, 2017).

36 Two weeks after the referendum, in October, Baghdad sent troops in a coalition with Iran to seize control of the main oilfield in the Kirkuk region, located in Kirkuk. Right after the Iraqi-Iranian troops had re-gained control of the main oilfields, Igor Sechin, sent a letter to Baghdad. In the letter, he accused the Iraqi government of not being interested enough in “Rosneft’s to develop southern Iraqi oilfields” (Zhdannikov, 2018). Above all, he claimed that Rosneft would instead do business with the Kurdish Regional Government, since it showed which showed “a higher interest in expanding strategic cooperation” (Zhdannikov, 2018). In other words, Rosneft informed Baghdad that it will invest billions of dollars in Kurdistan, to the detriment of Iraq, a state which is already too
fragmented to afford Moscow turning its back on them. In such fragmented territory, oil accounts for 60% of the overall Iraqi GDP, and the oil industry is by far “the most vital sector” of Iraq’s economy (Knights, 2014, p.1)