

THE US AND TURKEY

Erdoğan's Undeserving and Underwhelming Visit to DC

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Trump's ongoing bromance with Turkey's authoritarian leader notwithstanding, Congress and the Administration must act to make clear that the United States isn't giving Erdoğan a blank check to act in the Middle East.

Foreign leaders have long coveted invitations to Washington to meet with the President in the White House. Such encounters should be hard to come by, but President Trump has thrown open the Oval Office doors to a number of undeserving foreign officials, including Egypt's authoritarian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and Hungary's self-declared illiberal Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who met with Trump Wednesday, is the latest on that list. For Trump, the meeting with his Turkish counterpart was a welcome distraction from the impeachment hearings playing out on Capitol Hill. Aside from demonstrating the already well-established warm chemistry between the two leaders, however, the meeting produced no major breakthroughs on a range of contentious issues in the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

That didn't stop Trump from gushing during a joint news conference at the White House that he is "a big fan" and "very big friend" of Erdoğan. In his typical hyperbolic fashion, Trump declared Turkey to be a "great NATO ally and a strategic partner of the United States around the world," and described their talks as "wonderful and productive."

The attitude on Capitol Hill toward Erdoğan's visit has been very different. A bipartisan group in the House had urged Trump to rescind the invitation to his Turkish counterpart. Even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, "I share my colleagues' uneasiness at seeing President Erdoğan honored at the White House," a stinging rebuke by McConnell's standards. Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, blasted Trump for letting Turkey "off the hook for invading Syria, causing a mass exodus of Kurds, and purchasing the S-400 missile system from Russia."

The animosity toward Erdoğan in Congress has been building for a while. Last month, the House passed a resolution with only a handful of dissenting votes labelling the mass killings of some 1.5 million Armenians a century ago by the Ottoman Empire an act of genocide.

The House has also passed a bill threatening sanctions on Turkey for its recent brutal military incursion into northern Syria—which Erdoğan launched after Trump ordered U.S. troops out of the region. Erdoğan's forces have killed Kurdish civilians, displaced more than 100,000 from their homes, and, according to an internal State Department assessment on the ground, engaged in "war crimes and ethnic cleansing." With the Erdoğan visit over, McConnell, who had been blocking similar legislation in the Senate, should allow a vote to proceed.

During yesterday's meeting with Erdoğan, Trump boasted that a ceasefire negotiated last month by Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo with Erdoğan was holding. That claim was immediately disputed by Mazloum Abdi, the commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who wrote in a Twitter post that Turkish forces attacked the Syrian town of Tal Tamar, causing "massive displacement of the residents, in clear violation of the cease-fire agreement." Syrian Kurdish forces have been America's most reliable allies in the region in the fight against ISIS.

Erdoğan's reliance on proxies, largely an undisciplined bunch of repurposed jihadists, is guaranteed to continue generating mayhem, human rights abuses and war crimes, and new recruits for ISIS. Equally disturbing are recent reports that the late ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had traveled to Turkey just before the U.S. operation that killed him amid speculation that he may have been trying to relocate his family to Turkey.

If true, these developments raise questions about the competency and reliability of Turkish intelligence agencies—recalling concerns about Pakistan and Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad. Erdoğan's recent announcement that Turkish forces had captured al-Baghdadi's wife, sister, and brother-in-law only serves to deepen suspicions about what Turkish intelligence knew about al-Baghdadi and when they knew it. Erdoğan is clearly aware of this vulnerability, and it no doubt explains his announcement that several of al-Baghdadi's relatives had been detained in Turkey. These steps were undoubtedly taken to inoculate the Turkish President against possible reproaches in the United States for the lassitude with which Turkey has dealt with ISIS over the years. Yet the fact that these arrests only took place after al-Baghdadi's elimination by U.S. special forces only underlines the concerns about Turkey's policy of turning a blind eye to the jihadists in its midst.

Moreover, Turkey's increasing cooperation in Syria with Russian forces highlights growing doubts about its status as a NATO ally—Turkey has the second largest military in the Alliance—and reinforces the case for moving ahead with sanctions on Turkey for its acquisition of S-400 missiles from Rosoboronexport, a Russian entity sanctioned by the United States.

Although NATO is purportedly an alliance of democracies, Turkey is trending toward authoritarian one-man rule. Erdoğan holds the dubious distinction of jailing more journalists than any other leader in the world. More than 100,000 public servants have been swept up in a purge following the coup attempt in 2016, and Turkish security forces stand accused of torturing alleged coup supporters.

In light of all this, how could Trump possibly host Erdoğan? John Bolton, Trump's former National Security Advisor, has suggested Trump's personal and financial interests might have played a role. In a private speech to a Morgan Stanley gathering in Miami last week, as reported by NBC News, people present said Bolton "believes there is a personal or business relationship dictating Trump's position on Turkey because none of his advisers are aligned with him on the issue."

This theory was reinforced by a recent report in the *New York Times*, which examined the connections between the two leaders' sons-in-law—Jared Kushner, son-in-law and senior adviser

to Trump, and Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan's son-in-law and Finance Minister in Turkey. It is worth noting that the Trump Organization has a property in Istanbul.

The involvement of Trump's personal attorney in Turkey may shed additional light on Trump's readiness to bend over backward to accommodate Erdoğan. Rudy Giuliani represented Turkish-Iranian dual national, Reza Zarrab, who later pled guilty to running a massive scheme to evade Iran sanctions, in the process corrupting several Turkish government ministers and Erdoğan's family, according to his courtroom testimony.

Giuliani attempted to engineer a swap of Zarrab for Pastor Andrew Brunson—a perfectly innocent Protestant Evangelical who had lived peacefully in Turkey for 20 years and whose only crime was preaching the gospel. Officials at the State and Justice Departments wisely blocked such an exchange; Brunson was eventually released last October.

Giuliani has pressed the Trump Administration to extradite controversial Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom Erdoğan accuses of orchestrating the 2016 coup attempt, despite the fact that Turkish authorities have persistently failed to provide the Justice Department with credible evidence of his involvement. Erdoğan noted at the joint press conference that he was carrying “new evidence” that he hoped would persuade U.S. authorities to finally agree to return Gülen to Turkey. This is not the first time that Turkish delegations have come carrying purported evidence that will convince the United States to render the cleric to Turkish authorities. Given the reliance of Turkish courts on documents of dubious provenance, this “new evidence” hopefully will be turned over to the Justice Department to be handled in appropriate channels. This is all the more important since Giuliani's role in Turkey, much as in Ukraine, is testimony to the President's tendency to de-institutionalize U.S. foreign relations and utilize family members or cronies to create dubious diplomatic back channels subject to improper influence.

Giuliani's role also makes him an enabler of Erdoğan's efforts to export his contempt for rule of law from Turkey to the United States. Recall past Erdoğan trips to Washington during which his bodyguards attacked American citizens peacefully protesting his visits. Amid a heavy DC police presence Wednesday, and absent the thuggishness shown in the past by Erdoğan security forces, protests against the Turkish leader's visit remained largely peaceful.

Despite efforts by Trump and Erdoğan to paper over the deep differences on Syria, the S-400 purchase, the F-35 fighter jet, and the continued detention of U.S. Embassy and consulate local employees, no one should be taken in by this charade. Congress especially, including the five Republican Senators whom Trump invited, awkwardly, to join for part of the Erdoğan meeting (among them some who have been very critical of the Turkish leader), should not be swayed by the ongoing authoritarian bromance between the two leaders.

So what should be done? First, Congress, as a co-equal branch of government in the conduct of foreign policy, should continue to demand an immediate end to violence and attacks against the Kurds by Turkey's proxies as well as Turkish forces in northeastern Syria.

Second, the Administration should impose carefully targeted sanctions, as mandated by law, for Erdoğan's acquisition of Russian military capabilities, which are incompatible with NATO.

These sanctions should target those involved in prohibited transactions with Russia and Erdoğan's cronies and family who profit from them, but not the Turkish economy as a whole. Erdoğan will try to spin them as anti-Turkish, but Congress should strive to make sure that they are clearly aimed at the Erdoğan regime. Turkey remains a pivotal state and a NATO ally, and the United States must be prepared to play a long game and lay the groundwork now for relations with a post-Erdoğan Turkey.

Third, the United States should coordinate with NATO allies to make clear that, while it values Turkey's contributions to the Alliance, Turkey does not have a free pass to engage in reckless behavior.

Finally, while Washington and European capitals should express appreciation for (and provide additional resources to cope with) the burden Turkey has borne for taking in several million refugees from Syria, it should make clear that threatening a mass release of refugees into Europe or forcible resettlement of refugees in the so-called Syrian "safe-zone" will trigger further sanctions.

Turkey has been and should continue to be a vital member of NATO, but Erdoğan has responsibilities to live up to as well. Those include respecting human rights, not consorting with Putin, and not committing ethnic cleansing and war crimes against the Kurds. Unless and until he does these things, Erdoğan should not set foot inside the Oval Office again.

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