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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Turkish-US Relations: Heightened Tensions but Not the End of an Alliance

Policy Analysis Unit | October 2017

Turkish-US Relations under Pressure

Series: Situation Assessment

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Introduction

A Turkish national employed by the US Consulate in Istanbul was detained by the authorities in his country on October 4, 2017, and charged with spying for a foreign government and attempting to harm the constitutional order and the legitimate government of Turkey, kicking off a wave of reciprocal punitive volleys between Ankara and Washington. The first strike was the freezing of all non-immigrant visas granted by all US consulates across Turkey, announced by Washington's Embassy in Ankara. This was met by a similar announcement from the Turkish Embassy in Washington, which directly reciprocated the measure by denying all visas for US nationals.

US-Turkish Tensions: the Background

Recent tension between Washington and Ankara is the latest round in a conflict that has been building up since 2013. Some of the flashpoints of this conflict include:

- **Regime Change in Syria:** Turkey supported the ouster of Bashar Al Assad from power in Damascus from the very outset of the revolution in 2011. The United States on the other hand, in the form of the then-Obama Administration, pursued a much more ambiguous approach, which allowed it to declare its desire for Assad to leave power, while refusing to support any credible attempts to bring that about. The consequences of this ambiguity included the rise of extremist Islamist factions such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as well as bolstering Iranian influence within Syria's borders. Moscow's direct involvement in the conflict, which came in September of 2015, completely overturned the direction of the Syrian conflict.
- **American Support for Kurdish Ambitions:** Turkey was also angered by US support for the mainly Kurdish People's Protection Units, and which it backed against ISIL and other groups in northern Syria. Turkey fears that the group, which it regards as an extension of the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), will seek to establish a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria in the vacuum left by ISIL.
- **Disenchantment with NATO:** Turkey was left dissatisfied with the failure of the US and other NATO members to come to the aid of Turkey after a Russian military jet was shot down for violating Turkish airspace.

- **US Inconsistency regarding the Failed Coup:** The US White House and State Department failed to provide a speedy or firm condemnation of the failed coup attempt in July 2016 in Turkey. Then Secretary of State John Kerry called for “calm” during his first response to the crisis rather than demanding the protection of constitutional democratic rule¹. In fact, a statement by the US Embassy in Ankara described the events as a “rebellion”, and made no mention of a mutiny in the ranks of the Turkish military². In fact, official American denouncements of the planned coup were issued only after it emerged that the plot was falling apart. Later, Secretary of State Kerry even went as far as warning the Turkish authorities of the consequences of “excessive” retribution in the wake of the failed coup, in reference to the attempts to purge the military ranks of the coup conspirators as well as alleged tightening of media and other freedoms by the Turkish government. The allegations of increased censorship by the Turkish authorities led Kerry to question Turkey’s NATO membership, warning that being a part of the alliance “had implications for democracy”³. This last allegation in particular led to Turkish recriminations that the United States was in fact behind the coup plot, particularly when the latter refused to extradite the cleric Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish preacher who fell out with Erdogan’s Islamist government and exiled himself to Pennsylvania, USA⁴.

Trump’s White House: Escalation of Turkish–US Tensions

Ankara was optimistic for the incoming Trump Administration, especially as the new president’s designated National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, had previously lobbied for Turkish interests in Washington. In the end, Flynn’s record of representing Turkish—as well as Russian—interests were used against him in the campaign, which led to his forced resignation

¹ “Secretary of State John Kerry responds to the possibility of a military coup in Turkey,” *Politico*, July 15, 2016, available online: <https://goo.gl/mUN6vK>

² Megan Garvey, “State Department to U.S. citizens in Turkey: Do not go to our consulates or embassy,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 2016, available online: <https://goo.gl/Kq4b2z>

³ “Joint Press Availability with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini,” U.S. Department of State, July 18, 2016, available online:

⁴ Victor Kotsev and John Dyer, “Turkey blames U.S. for coup attempt,” *USA Today*, July 18, 2016, available online: <https://goo.gl/4LTO7b>

following a three-week stint as National Security Advisor⁵. Indeed, there were no dramatic improvements in Turkish-American relations under Trump. Not only did Erdogan fail to persuade Trump to recognize the Syria-based Kurdish Union Party as a proxy of the PKK, already designated as a terrorist group by the United States, but American support for the People's Protection Units only increased following Erdogan's visit to Washington in May, 2017. Clashes between protestors and Erdogan's security detail during the same visit to Washington led to several of the Turkish bodyguards being charged *in absentia* for harming the demonstrators, while Ankara retorted that the US had failed to provide adequate protection for a visiting foreign president, nor for the Turkish mission in Washington, DC⁶. Added to this litany of grievances were American allegations made in September that a former Turkish Economy Minister colluded with a Turkish businessman currently imprisoned in the United States for allegations of violating sanctions then in place on Iran. By the beginning of October, Ankara enraged the US further by hosting the presidents of both Iran and Venezuela, two countries that Washington is attempting to sideline from the world order.

Turkey Adapts to the New Environment

Turkish doubts about the reliability of an alliance with the United States, and with NATO more broadly, drove the country to seek a new set of alliances with regional and wider global partners, including with Iran. Turkish misgivings do not appear to be rooted simply in this short-term spat with Washington, but rather with a wider seismic shift in the Western approach to Turkey as a whole. Indications of this include the long-running stalling of Turkey's bid to join the European Union—with Federica Mogherini even threatening to disqualify Turkish membership entirely if it brings back the death penalty to deal with the alleged coup plotters—and German stoking of tensions with Ankara, and even threats to force the country out of NATO⁷.

This also motivated Turkish involvement in the Astana Talks on the Syrian crisis. Together with Russia and Iran, these talks have already produced tangible outcomes, most notably in the form of the de-escalation zones. The Turkish military has already become directly involved in the

⁵ Callum Paton, "Flynn, Turkey, Trump: Turkey has Infiltrated Highest Levels of U.S. Government, Kurdish Leader Reports," *Newsweek*, May 19, 2017, available online: <https://goo.gl/1WjDfE>

⁶ Ashraf Khalil, "19 indicted, including 15 Turkish security officials, for attacking protestors during Erdogan visit to U.S.," *The Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 2017, available online: <https://goo.gl/gh4F8v>

⁷ See Joint Press Availability with EU High Representative, above

creation and protection of one such zone in the Syrian governorate of Idlib, from which it purged members of an Al Qaeda affiliate. Further driving Turkish cooperation with Iran and Russia is the determination to prevent Syrian Kurdish groups from creating an autonomous enclave, a prospect of increasing gravity given the recent attempt by Iraqi Kurds to unilaterally declare independence following a referendum. A clear indicator that this latest change in Turkey's international relations may be more than a passing phase is Ankara's purchase of an S-400 missile defense system from Russia, in spite of objections from its nominal NATO allies⁸.

The US-Turkey Alliance: Future Prospects

With no alternatives to it in sight, it would be difficult to imagine the final end to the decades-old alliance between Ankara and Washington. The Turkish economy, for all of its strength, remains reliant largely on foreign investors, many of whom are American⁹. With its military doctrines based on membership of NATO and protecting its borders from Russian encroachment, the Turkish state itself may find itself incapable of entirely abandoning its Western alliance right now, particularly as Russia, at present, is not a viable alternative to the United States: Moscow and Ankara have too many fundamental incompatibilities on the world stage. In parallel, Ankara remains indispensable to the United States and to NATO more broadly. Turkey brings to the table a large, populous and strong Muslim power, which also represents the second largest standing army within NATO, as well as the home of a number of military bases and installations used by the entire alliance. Of particular interest are the Incirlik and Izmir airbases used by the international anti-ISIL coalition to launch strikes on targets in Syria and Iraq and also house a part of the European missile defense system and reconnaissance/intelligence assets used by the US.

The US alone bases 2,700 personnel and scores of tactical nuclear missiles in Incirlik, while the Izmir base is the main permanent base for NATO ground forces. Taken together, all of this suggests that a rupture in Turkey's relations with its Western allies would have significant negative consequences for the stability of the Middle East and beyond. One possible repercussion for a breakdown of Turkey's relations with the rest of NATO would be a surge in

⁸ Jeff Daniels, "US relays concern to Turkey after NATO ally makes deposit to buy Russian defense system," CNBC, September 12, 2017, available online: <https://goo.gl/SuooJu>

⁹ Ben Holland and Selcan Hacaoglu, "Why the U.S. and Turkey are Suddenly in a Major Standoff," *Bloomberg*, October 9, 2017, available online: <https://goo.gl/hi1WHg>

the numbers of Syrian refugees entering Western Europe. Notably, a number of Turkish threats made against the United States have yet to materialize. These include the possibility, floated in media reports, of kicking US forces out of the Incirlik Airbase and preventing of US-supported Kurdish forces from advancing on Raqqa in Syria. The Pentagon also made clear that its own military operations based out of Turkey were not adversely affected by the recent escalation in tensions between the two governments.

Conclusion

Mutual codependence between the United States and Turkey ensures that this latest escalation of tensions will not evolve into a full-scale breakdown of the alliance. Nonetheless, it is clear that we are presently witnessing the birth pangs of a new arrangement, in which Turkey realigns its present position regarding the West and Russia, without switching alliances outright. This is a result of Turkey's traditional alliances with Western powers failing to provide it with the protection it craves in its complex geostrategic environment. For its part, the United States cannot afford to lose such a strategically valuable Muslim partner to Russia and or Iran.