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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Erdogan's Washington Trip Exposes Rifts with Obama Administration

Policy Analysis Unit | Apr 2016

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Introduction

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's spring visit to Washington for the Nuclear Security Summit revealed the extent of American-Turkish disagreement over a host of regional issues, among which Syria was the most prominent. Disagreements came to the surface in a disguised political escalation staged by the US administration when, on the eve of Erdogan's arrival on March 29, it announced that his meeting with President Obama would be an unofficial one; a message intended to signal Washington's displeasure with Turkey's policies in the region.¹ Parallel to this, major American newspapers mounted a vicious media campaign for the duration of the visit, accusing Erdogan of trampling on press and media freedoms, of curtailing democratic freedoms in his country, and even describing the Turkish leader as a "dictator" and "tyrant."²

Negative Signals on Both Sides

Media accusations mirrored those made by Obama administration officials, the US President himself included. Following his informal meeting with Erdogan, Obama told media that he urged his counterpart during their meeting not to suppress democratic debate in his country; an accusation Erdogan rejects. For his part, the Turkish President has indicated that US pressure on this front is simply a tactic to push Turkish policy in the Middle East to conform with the American approach, and as an effort to "divide and destroy Turkey if it cannot be appropriated."³ This tactic was apparent in a recent article published by *The Atlantic*, which said that Obama considers Erdogan "a failure and an authoritarian, one who refuses to use his enormous army to bring stability to Syria."⁴ The article makes the notable link between Erdogan's "authoritarianism" and Turkish policies in the region.

¹ Oren Dorell, "Turkey's President Erdogan visits Washington amid policy rifts," *USA TODAY*, March 31, 2016, at: <http://goo.gl/kUnJy0>.

² Eli Lake & Josh Rogin, "How Washington Got Turkey's Dictator So Wrong," *Bloomberg View*, March 30, 2016, at: <http://goo.gl/RQHjyW>.

³ "Erdogan: Convergence of the Turkish and American positions on the Syrian Kurds," *Reuters*, April 3, 2016, at: <http://ara.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idARAKCN0X00G9>.

⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

After the White House downgraded Erdogan's meeting with the US President on the pretext that Obama's time was short, Erdogan took his own shots at American policy. At a dinner hosted for American researchers including think tank delegates, academics, and former government officials Erdogan said the United States had a strategic need for Turkey, and that it should not take Turkey for granted as though it were "in its pocket." Erdogan also criticized US policy in Syria, and its failure to take Turkish considerations into account. He suggested that the US should not have backed the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Turkey sees as an extension of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK),⁵ a designated terrorist organization in Turkey, the United States, and Europe. In the face of these concerns, the United States claimed it saw no such link between the two parties.

Major Disagreements

Mutual discontent between the Obama administration and Erdogan government goes back to a difference in the countries' approaches to Middle East issues. The United States, for its part sees current events in the Middle East within a global context, where for Turkey, even before the war in Syria, issues are regional interests. Turkey and the US have disagreements on many points, including: the Arab uprisings and the coup seeking to route them; Turkey's relations with Israel, which have deteriorated over recent years; and Ankara's openness to some Islamist forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. In the US, displeasure with Turkey has taken several forms.

Following the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014, US Congress members launched a campaign against Turkey, which they dubbed a "frenemy," and demanded sanctions be launched against the country.⁶ At the time, this was accompanied by escalation in the media against Turkey with calls for a re-evaluation of its position in NATO, and even its expulsion. Expulsion was called for based on claims

⁵ John Hudson, "Erdogan Uses Closed-Door Meeting to Blast Obama Administration," *Foreign Policy*, March 30, 2016, at:

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/erdogan-uses-closed-door-meeting-to-blast-white-house/>.

⁶ Julian Pecquet, "Congress Goes After 'Frenemies' Turkey, Qatar," *US News*, September 10, 2014, at: <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/09/10/congress-goes-after-frenemies-turkey-qatar/>.

that Erdogan was an “authoritarian” and had “extremist Islamist” tendencies.⁷ In December 2013, when still prime minister Erdogan alluded to a potential American role in the campaign of arrests on corruption charges launched by elements in the Turkish police against his inner circle, he threatened to expel the US ambassador from Ankara.⁸

Syria: the Spanner in Turkish–American Relations

Of all the areas of disagreement between the two countries, the Syrian crisis represents the key point of divergence between Turkey and the United States. The Obama administration, before the rise of ISIL, viewed Syria as a marginal issue given the absence of major US interests there, and had no clear strategy to resolve the Syrian crisis. This allowed Iran to encroach in Syria during the early years of the revolution. It was only when ISIL appeared on the scene and began to expand from Iraq into the vacuum left behind by the Syrian regime in the east and northeast of the country and Russia took the opportunity to intervene, to become the most influential player in Syria, that the US took a real interest. Even then, however, the Obama strategy remained focused on weakening ISIL and depriving it of a safe haven. However, while Washington aims to weaken ISIL, it is now working in concert with Russia to pressure Syrian opposition forces and factions to enter into negotiations with the Syrian regime. The larger aim of this strategy is to engineer a political solution that permits Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to remain in power as “honorary president” by means of constitutional amendments and the transformation of the system of government in Syria from a presidential to a parliamentary one. This idea appears to be based more on fantasy than reality, because the authority of the dictator does not derive from constitutional formulations on paper, as was made clear in the Yemeni experience. Furthermore, it is clear that the Obama administration, in agreement with Russia, aims to neutralize the Turkish and Saudi roles in Syria by monopolizing the lead role in efforts for a settlement under the symbolic auspices of the UN.

In contrast, Turkey sees the conflict in Syria as a priority because of its major effect on national security, specifically on Kurdish separatist politics, and especially after last

⁷ Jonathan Schanzer, “Time to Kick Turkey Out of NATO?” *Politico Magazine*, October 09, 2014, at:

<http://goo.gl/vEjWBy>.

⁸ Selcuk Gokoluk & Benjamin Harvey, “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Foreign Ambassadors Could Be Expelled,” *Bloomberg News*, December 21, 2013, at: <http://goo.gl/kiVkr6>.

March, when the Syrian Kurds declared a federal system in northern Syria along the Turkish border. Turkey is also hosting more than two million Syrian refugees. It sees the international failure to deal with the barbarity of the Syrian regime and its lack of support for the Syrian revolutionaries as having allowed Syria to become a safe haven for terrorist groups, which have begun to target deep inside Turkey. Given these close-to-home realities, Turkey requested, unsuccessfully, the creation of a safe zone along its border. The NATO-enforced no-fly zone, where camps for Syrian refugees would be established, was envisioned as part of a wider strategy to bring down the Assad regime. This Turkish request, however, was not met with a positive response, and Turkey had no desire to carry out the plan alone, given its fears that allies of the Syrian regime (Russia and Iran) might react adversely. The matter was no longer considered feasible after the Russian intervention in Syria.

The difference in the Turkish and American approaches to Syria is reflected in the priorities of each side. The United States sees its priority as taking on and defeating ISIL, while Turkey wants to bring about political change in Syria to end the rule of Assad and establish a civilian democratic state capable of defeating terrorist movements like ISIL. This clash of priorities has resulted in US annoyance with Turkey's current military focus on being able to take on the PKK, which is leading a separatist rebellion in the Turkish south. Washington would prefer that the issue of the Kurds be put aside so that focus can be put on ISIL. From the same perspective, American support for the PKD is a key point of divergence. Ankara views the PKD and its military wing, the People's Defense Forces (PYD), as an extension of the PKK. Washington, on the other hand, sees both the PKD and PYD as allies in the war against ISIL,⁹ understands them to be organizationally independent of the PKK, and is supplying them with weapons even though they represent an extreme left and separatist movement.

These divergent opinions are reflected in strategic and military relations. Although US-Turkish relations are supposed to be firmly rooted in the context of NATO, which Turkey joined in 1952, since the November 2015 downing of a Russian fighter jet that Ankara said had violated its airspace, Turkey has not found sufficient support as a NATO member. In fact, the message from Washington and NATO to Ankara has stressed the need for de-escalation, the ending of Turkish air sorties over Syria, and no escalation

⁹ David Barchard, "US-Turkey gap more visible during Erdogan's visit to Washington," *Middle East Eye*, March 31, 2016, at: <http://goo.gl/RXyYDt>.

with the Russians lest Turkey be dragged into a broader war.¹⁰ Turkey was also notified that NATO would only come to the rescue if it was a case of self-defense. In the aftermath of that statement, Turkish influence in the Syrian arena began to wane, particularly on the border regions, while Kurdish influence grows with joint American and Russian backing.

Escalation of the disagreement with Washington and the need to fill the vacuum left behind by the Obama administration's hands-off approach to regional issues pushed Turkey to seek regional allies. This explains Turkey's recent major rapprochement with Saudi Arabia despite markedly different priorities here as well. Saudi concerns are almost exclusively focused on the Iranian threat, while Turkey is wholly focused on the threat of Kurdish separatist movements (a subject to be dealt with in a separate Assessment Report on King Salman's visit to Turkey).

Conclusion

There is unmistakable tension between the United States and Turkey. This tension is not linked to the ideological background of Erdogan and his party as much as it is linked to the different regional calculations and foreign policies of both sides. That does not, however, negate both countries' need for the other. Turkey is heavily reliant on the NATO security umbrella. This is particularly true in light of tensions with Russia. The United States is unlikely to give up on such an important and heavyweight ally in the region, with the second largest military in NATO, and the alliance's only Muslim-state member, and given the context of the US war against ISIL and the need to confront growing Russian aggression. At the same time, Turkey's strategic position may in the coming phase be one of the forces for calm in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Egypt, given its good relations with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Its position in NATO as a bridge between East and West, Asia and Europe; its direct influence in conflict hot spots, such as Iraq, Syria, and Armenia; and its common border with Iran; would only contribute to this strategic position. There are also flourishing economic relations between Turkey and the United States, including with the US defense industry, which sees Turkey as an important market.

¹⁰ Bertrand, "Insecure."