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Abstract

My remarks focus on US-Turkish relations. They address the prospect of improving relations between Turkey and the United States, during President Donald J. Trump's administration. Remarks also consider potential areas of agreement between the US and Turkey, as well as flash points in US-Turkey relations. Flash points include Turkey's demand for the extradition of Fethullah Gülen and discontinuation of US security cooperation with Syrian Kurds.

Introduction

Turkey's President Tayyip Erdoğan and Trump had their first telephone call on February 7, 2017. The call was marked by high hopes and mutual admiration. The White House indicated that the two discussed their "shared commitment to combatting terrorism in all its forms." Trump "reiterated US support to Turkey as a strategic partner and NATO ally, and welcomed Turkey's contributions" to the campaign against the Islamic State.

Erdoğan and Trump avoided contentious issues. Trump did not criticize Erdoğan for mass arrests and dismissals that followed the attempted coup on July 15, 2016. Erdoğan did not mention Trump's Muslim ban on travel to the United States. They found common ground in their disdain for the media, with Erdoğan praising Trump for putting a reporter "in his place" during a recent news conference. They discussed the trip to Turkey by CIA Director Mike Pompeo on February 9-10. Vice President Mike Pence subsequently called Prime Minister Yildirim promising a "new era" in US-Turkish relations; Erdoğan invited Trump to visit Turkey.

Despite surface-level rapport, substantive rapprochement is more problematic. Erdoğan has red lines. He wants Trump to reject Pentagon proposals to arm Kurdish fighters in Syria. Erdoğan insists that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Syria's leading Kurdish party, are one in the same. However, the US considers the PKK a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), while the PYD is excluded from the list of FTOs. Erdoğan also demands that the US extradite Fethullah Gülen.

Gülen

Erdoğan views Gülen as an enemy of the Turkish state and mastermind of the coup on July 15, 2016. Gülen has denied playing any role. The US has strict rules regarding extradition. It is not a political decision. The US Justice Department views extradition as a strictly legal matter. The US Justice Department must decide if Turkish evidence is strong enough to merit extradition. Even if it recommends extradition, a US Federal Court must decide. Gülen can contest extradition and appeal if he loses. This process could take months, if not years. The Gülen issue is not going away.

Raqqa

The People's Protection Units (YPG), Syrian Kurdish fighters, act as the US ground force in Syria. The Pentagon provided weapons and close air support during the battle for Kobani. In Kobani, the US effectively supported a combined force of the YPG, PKK, Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) and Peshmerga. The US later assisted the YPG to take Tal Abyad, a critical border crossing between Turkey and Syria used to resupply ISIS in Raqqa. The US is currently supporting the YPG via the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). With just a few thousand Arab fighters, the SDF is a fig leaf for the YPG, which numbers 40,000 men and women under arms.

Former President Barack Obama's national security team developed a battle plan to attack Raqqa, the de-facto caliphate of the Islamic State. Top US military commanders pushed for directly arming the YPG. Then-Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter backed the plan. So did Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., and Army Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of US forces in the Middle East. In December 2016, Dunford and Carter submitted a formal request to arm the Kurds with armored vehicles, antitank weapons, machine guns and mine-clearing equipment.

The Obama administration was overly deliberative. On January 17, National Security Adviser Susan Rice gave the Trump transition team a paper detailing plans to arm the YPG, including talking points that Trump could use to explain the move to Erdoğan. The Obama plan called for US forces to train the Kurds in using the new equipment and fighting in a densely packed city. However, it lacked details about how many US troops would be required and where the training would take place. The paper did not include a provision for coordinating operations with Russia, a clear political strategy for mollifying the Turks, or a contingency plan if the Kurdish attack stalled. Trump rejected the plan.

Trump gave Secretary of Defense James Mattis thirty days to present a plan that would “utterly destroy” ISIS. The plan is due by February 27. Trump could increase coordination with Russia and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to seize Raqqa. He could endorse a Turkish-Arab force, or he could conclude that arming the Kurds represents the best option. Turkey will strongly object if the US decides to arm the Kurds and support the YPG to liberate Raqqa. Trump recently indicated that he could deploy US ground forces.

Safe Zones

Questions of establishing safe zones in Syria and proposals for increased autonomy in Syria are further flash points in US-Turkey relations. Trump said he will “absolutely do safe zones in Syria.” He called them “big and beautiful.” Establishing safe zones is a consequential decision that must consider: Where will safe zones be established? How will safe zones be enforced? Which local fighters can the US rely on?

Safe zones could yield substantial benefits. Safe zones will shrink the territory controlled by ISIS. They will be a launch point for rebel groups fighting ISIS. Safe zones will also help mitigate the humanitarian crisis, serving as a sanctuary for displaced Syrians.

There are also costs. Establishing safe zones will require significant military assets. US troops will be in harm’s way. Enforcing safe zones also risks putting the US on a slippery slope to further involvement in Syria’s civil war. Safe zones will require the US to expand its deployment of Special Forces. Safe zones will also require air power. De-conflicting with Russian warplanes will be critical.

Military action will not occur in a vacuum. Safe zones will go hand in hand with US diplomatic engagement. However, Russia and Turkey have sought to exclude the US

from talks aimed at ending Syria's civil war. The rancorous collapse of the "peace conference" in Astana on January 24, backed by Russia and Turkey, showed the limits to Russian-Turkish diplomacy and the indispensable role of the US in mediating and enforcing a peace agreement.

The US could establish a safe zone on the border with Jordan working with local fighters organized as the Southern Front. If the US chooses to establish a safe zone in Syria along the border with Turkey, it may choose to work with the YPG, which would exacerbate tensions with Turkey. Turkish Special Forces have already staked out its own zone of influence in Jarablus. Ankara will view a YPG-enforced safe zone along Turkey's border as a nascent Kurdish state, protected by the US the same way that the US protected the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Autonomy

Turkey excluded the PYD from the Astana talks. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov invited the PYD to attend the Moscow conference a few days later. Lavrov presented a draft constitution for Syria, including restrictions on the power of the Syrian presidency, with most powers deferred to the parliament and a newly created "Assembly of Regions." A provision stipulates equal rights for Kurds and Arabs. Russia also invited discussion allowing for "autonomy of Kurdish regions", as a step towards federalization. Under the draft, the president would serve for seven years with no option for a second consecutive term.

Ankara views constitutional power sharing as a step towards fragmentation and independence. Turkey rejects federalism and autonomy, which it fears would inspire Kurds in Turkey to seek a similar arrangement. Erdoğan will be incensed if Putin endorses decentralization, and Trump goes along, widening the gap between Turkey and the United States.

Conclusion

Turkish leaders have a history of blaming Great Powers for their internal problems. If popular support for Erdoğan erodes, which may occur in response to deteriorating economic conditions in Turkey, Erdoğan will look to blame others for Turkey's plight. Blaming the United States would affect US-Turkish relations. Allying with Russia would further erode Turkey's standing in NATO. Questions about Turkey's suitability as a member of the North Atlantic Alliance would, in turn, deepen divisions in Turkish society and polarize Turkish politics.