DONALD J. TRUMP

THE 45TH U.S. PRESIDENCY AND BEYOND

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES



EDITED BY

JOHN DIXON & MAX J. SKIDMORE

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TURKEY: A CUL DE SAC IN AMERICAN RELATIONS UNDER THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY

Mustafa Türkeş and Coşkun Soysal

Introduction

The 45th U.S. president, in November 2016, should have improved bilateral relations. However, contrary to that optimism, the relations never took a friendly turn and had deteriorated by the end of the Trump Administration.

As the Republican presidential nominee on July 21, 2016, Donald J. Trump articulated his expectations from Turkey as follows:

> I think Turkey can do a lot against ISIS, and I would hope that if I'm dealing with them, they will do much more about ISIS. …I think we have a potentially—we could have a potentially very successful relationship with Turkey. And it would be really wonderful if we could put [Turkey and the Kurdish forces in Syria] somehow both together.[1]

On November 9, 2016, one day after the election, from which Trump emerged as President-elect, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his optimism: "The election marks the beginning of a new era in the U.S. …I hope the choice of the American people will lead to good steps for basic rights and freedoms, democracy and the future of our region"[2] [3] He further clarified his expectations from Trump's presidency on January 9, 2017: "I believe we will accelerate dialogue when Mr. Trump

1 Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html.

2 Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/world-leaders-react-to-donald-trumps-us-election-victory.

3 Retrieved from: https://fr.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-election-turkey-erdogan-idUKKBN1341LH.

takes office. I believe we will reach a consensus with Mr. Trump, particularly on regional issues."[4]

On the same day, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım articulated another important expectation:

> I am openly calling on the new president from here about the urgent extradition of Fethullah Gülen, the mastermind, executor and perpetrator of the heinous July 15 [2016] coup attempt, who lives on U.S. soil. . . . I am sure that you can give Turkish-US relations a new start and open a new page.[5]

As did Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: "We desire to reinforce with the U.S.A. our strategic cooperation based on trust."[6]

A week before the inauguration day, Minister of Defense Fikri Işık, on January 12, 2017, pointed out a further Turkish expectation about U.S. policy towards Syria: "Turkey hopes the incoming U.S. Administration under President-elect Donald Trump will correct the mistake of allying with the Syrian Kurdish People's militia in the fight against Islamic State."[7]

As is clear from the above statements, there were high hopes when Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the U.S. in November 2016; by the end of the Trump Administration the bilateral relations had dramatically worsened. This study illustrates the way in which bilateral relations deteriorated between the two countries under the Trump and Erdoğan presidencies after such optimistic expressions at the outset.

4 Retrieved from: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/donald-trump-presidency-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-us-turkish-relations-barack-obama-inauguration-ceremony-a7517801.html.

5 Retrieved from: https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-congratulates-trump-over-presidential-victory-calls-for-gulens-extradition-105910.

6 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/MevlutCavusoglu/status/796272348198567936.

7 Retrieved from: https://fr.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN14W0PW.

Key Expectations of the Parties

The Trump Administration's Expectations

The Trump Administration had five major expectations from the Erdoğan Administration:

i) To more deeply involve Turkey in Syria, in order to reduce the U.S. burden of the war against the ISIL, but not so as to allow it to exert any influence in Syria.

ii) To make Turkey reach a compromise with the Syrian Kurdish partners (the paramilitary People's Defence Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, PYG) of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) of the U.S. that the Trump Administration wishes to use in the Syrian war.

iii) To make Turkey reduce the burden of the U.S. by assuming more responsibilities within the confines of Trump's "America First" version of American nationalism.

iv) To make sure Turkey does not tilt to buy alternative air defense systems.

v) To make sure Turkey contributes to the U.S. policy of curbing Iranian and Russian influence in Syria and Iraq.

The Erdoğan Administration's Expectations

The Erdoğan Administration, on the other hand, had seven major expectations from the Trump Administration:

i) To cease supporting the Kurdish armed groups in Syria and begin collaborating with Turkey as the principal military partner on the ground in Syria.

ii) To extradite to Turkey Fethullah Gülen and other FETO[8]

8 FETO—"Fethullahist Terrorist Organization" (https://www.setav.org/en/tag/fethullah-terrorist-organization-feto/)—is the wider Turkish religious community led by the Turkish IslamistMoslem, Fethullah Gülen, an allegedly clandestine network of his disciples within the Turkish bureaucracy, through which Gülen has committed crimes against the Turkish state, such as masterminding the military putsch of July 15, 2016, which led to it being designated a terrorist organization by the

members in the U.S..

iii) To drop the legal case opened in the U.S. federal court against Turkish officials and the Halkbank.

iv) To not provoke anti-Islamic stances.

v) To not prevent Turkey from getting air defense systems.

vi) to tolerate Turkey's improving relations with Russia; and

vii) to support Turkey in its bid to expand its sphere of influence in the Muslim world.

The Erdoğan Administration's First Disappointment: Trump's Anti-Immigration and Anti-Islamic Stance

Although the Erdoğan Administration openly tilted toward Trump in his presidential race, it was also clear from the very beginning that there were potential fault lines in prospective relations with the Trump Administration, particularly on Trump's anti-Islamic stance. Trump had a declared disdain for different social identities—most apparent in his views and deeds about immigration and immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants. Both Trump and some of his high-ranking colleagues in his Administration, most notably his former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo[9]—had a particular distaste for Islam and Muslims. They were often labeled "anti-Muslim."[10] The Erdoğan Administration, on the other hand, had already become notorious abroad for its alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood's international network (and for Hamas in particular) in close cooperation with Qatar (Andrew and Schanzer, 2014) and for its own domestic and regional agenda based on an Islamist–nationalist variant of neo-Ottomanism (Türkeş, 2016). Notwithstanding these fault lines, these issues remained far from transforming into serious problems most probably because they could never seize the top place in

Turkish legal authorities in July 2016 (https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/turkey/).

9 Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dont-overlook-john-bolton-and-mike-pompeos-anti-muslim-ties/2018/04/12/6a4ce456-3dc3-11e8-a7d1-e4efec6389f0_story.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_13.

10 Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/15/short-history-president-trumps-anti-muslim-bigotry/.

bilateral relations in the face of such key issues as the Syrian crisis and the U.S. support for the Kurdish armed groups in Syria.

Trump actively targeted immigrants throughout his presidential campaign in 2016. His anti-immigrant policy was in line with his campaign rhetoric. As it was examined in Türkeş and Akdan (2018, pp. 275-279), one of his most notable deeds was the executive order that temporarily banned immigrants and visa-holders from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the U.S., which is rather known as the "Muslim Ban." Notably, President Erdoğan barely reacted to it. He had stated that Trump had "no tolerance for Muslims in America" and called for a name change for the Trump Towers that belongs to a private Turkish company located in Istanbul.[11] He later repositioned himself by arguing that Trump would later change his discourse in order to get re-elected, so: "We need to avoid being deceived [by Trump's campaign rhetoric]."[12] When Trump assumed the presidency, however, President Erdoğan continued to turn a blind eye to such Trump rhetoric most probably due to his search for a cooperation in bilateral relations to such an extent that some Islamist columnists in Turkey criticized this silence on the matter (see, for example, Taşgetiren, 2017).

As for the Trump Administration, it was Turkey's policies towards Syria, its acquisition of S-400 surface-to-air missile defense systems from Russia, and the arrest of American Pastor Andrew Brunson on disputed charges, that mattered most in relation to its bilateral relations with Turkey. The Erdoğan Administration's Islamist credentials mattered only in special circumstances such as when President Erdoğan hosted Hamas members, but even then, the U.S. reaction was limited to official press statements from the Department of State, presumably for the sake of appearances.[13]

From High Hopes to a Parting of the Ways over Syria

Turkey's initial approach to the uprisings and subsequent war in Syria was

11 Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/erdogan-wants-istanbul-towers-to-lose-trump-name-1466855822.

12 Retrieved from https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/erdogan-islam-karsiti-trumpi-boyle-savundu-63457.

13 Retrieved from https://www.state.gov/president-erdogans-meeting-with-hamas-leadership/.

indeed in a convergence with that of the U.S. When the situation in Syria began to worsen in 2011, Turkey strongly urged President Bashar Al-Assad to bring about economic and political reforms similar to the ones articulated by the Obama Administration. Although the interests of both Turkey and the U.S. temporarily converged at the beginning of the uprising in Syria—both wanted Al-Assad to give up power—their ultimate objectives began to clash. As the uprising and war in Syria became protracted, the Erdoğan Administration began to call for a no-fly zone inside Syria, so as to create a secure and militarily enforced safe haven, as part of Erdoğan's bid to transform the region and exert his influence across the Middle East through regime changes and support for the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movements' uprisings. Whereas the U.S. did not support the safe-haven idea but rather sought to contain Iran and its Hezbollah proxy and to fight against ISIL and al-Qaeda terror activities in the region as well as, and perhaps more significantly, controlling the oil-rich regions in northeast Syria. The biggest conflict between the two countries, however, emerged when the U.S. opted for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) instead of Turkey as its main military partner on the ground in Syria. This was one of the main Erdoğan expectation of the Trump Administration that the U.S. Administration should work with Turkey rather than relying on SDF, whose backbone consists of the People's Protection Units (YPG) in north Syria, which, in turn, constitutes the paramilitary component of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)—a direct Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK), which has waged a separatist insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984 and has been designated as a terrorist organization by both Turkey and the U.S. Turkey has serious concerns about separatist activities when it comes to Kurdish military activism in the region. The Erdoğan Administration, which sought to become the principal military partner of the U.S. in Syria, rather than the Kurdish armed groups, in its fight against ISIL, and expected the U.S. to cease supporting these Kurdish forces.

As for the Trump Administration, Trump himself also made some statements that heightened Turkish expectations during his presidential campaign. The appointment of the senior diplomat James Jeffrey, former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, as the Special Representative for Syria Engagement in 2018 and later also, concurrently, as the Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIL in 2019, raised hopes in Turkey. The former Envoy Brett McGurk had not been welcomed by the Erdoğan

Administration due to his close collaboration on the ground with the Kurdish armed groups in north Syria. The appointment of Jeffrey in his place, as a diplomat who was supposedly very much familiar with Turkish sensitivity, encouraged the Erdoğan Administration to think that the U.S. might change course with respect to its position regarding the Kurdish forces in Syria. However, what Trump said was misunderstood—partially understood at best—since Trump has never promised to give up supporting the Kurdish cause in Syria despite his relatively positive messages about Erdoğan and Turkey and his declared desire to reach out deals and collaboration with Turkey in Syria and the wider Muslim world. On the contrary, he stated that he was "a fan of the Kurds" and that "it would be ideal if we could get [Turks and Kurds] all together" in Syria.[14] Jeffrey was also suggesting nothing but similar proposals to reconcile Turkey and the Kurdish groups in Syria albeit through more concrete and definite steps even before his appointment (Jeffrey and Pollock, 2018). These steps included making the PYD/YPG cut its links with the PKK and stop helping it in PKK's activities against Turkey, and initiating a dialogue process between Turkey and the PYD.

The ongoing Turkish-U.S. rift emanates mainly from the U.S. support for the Kurdish armed groups in the quest to hold on to vast swaths of territory taken back from ISIL in 2017 in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. attempts to totally defeat ISIL by using Kurdish ground forces, avoiding full-scale U.S. military troop deployment provoked an escalation of the conflict between the U.S. armed Kurdish groups and Turkish forces in Syria. As the Syrian Kurdish forces consolidated their presence in these territories, especially those along the Turkish borders west of the Euphrates River—areas contiguous to Kurdish border towns and villages inside Turkey—Turkey's concerns were heightened (Beyoghlow, 2020, p. 6).

Deep strategic differences also existed between the two administrations over the future of Syria. The Erdoğan Administration sees the U.S. presence against ISIL as secondary to its long-term strategy of shaping the future of the greater Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean region. First, although a stable, secure, and friendly north Syrian neighborhood is favorable to Turkish interests, the Erdoğan Administration also seems to have a desire to continue influencing domestic and regional Syrian and Arab

14 Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html.

dynamics. To achieve this, Turkey also tilted little away from the U.S. to have closer cooperation with Russia and Iran, as illustrated by its recent involvements in the multiple cease-fire arrangements engineered by Russia and Iran in Astana (Kazakhstan) and Sochi (Russia). All in all, Syria, although it was the flash point of relations between the two countries under the Erdoğan and Trump Administrations, has been far from an arena able to satisfying the two administrations' expectations of each other.

What is clear is that the Trump Administration never gave up its policy of creating a space where it could dictate the rule of the game in the backyard of Turkey, nor did the Erdoğan Administration refrain from challenging the U.S. position in northern Syria. It seems that both administrations took up a harsh position against each other. In the end, what the two parties achieved was nothing more than undermining each other's position by means of collaborating with each other's potential and actual adversaries. The U.S. Administration openly and extensively armed Kurdish groups, (PYD/YPG) in north of Syria that alarmed Turkey. This situation made Erdoğan Administration engage more closely with Iran, and especially Russia in Idlib and Afrin in north Syria and expand its Russian collaboration into the spheres of military and defense industry.

A Deal Offer by Erdoğan: "Give Us the Pastor in Your Hands and We'll Give Back Yours!"

The Justice and Development Party (JDP) government under the leadership of Erdoğan expected the U.S. to side with them in their fight against FETO from the very first rift between the JDP and the Gülenists on February 7, 2012. This was when the Gülenist prosecutors summoned Hakan Fidan, then Undersecretary of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, and charged him with collusion with the PKK/KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistanê within the Kurdistan Communities Union). This was an apparent move to criminalize the Oslo negotiations secretly held between the intelligence officers of the JDP government of the time and the PKK sometime between 2008 and 2011. Indeed, the Gülenists had previously been among the principal allies of the JDP in its fight against the actual and potential opposition forces—not least the secularist military officers—by also setting up such controver-

sial trials[15] as *Ergenekon* (secularist clandestine organization accused of plotting against the Turkish government[16]) and *Balyoz* (Operation Sledgehammer coup plan[17] trial,[18] through which hundreds of military officers could be, but were not,[19] put behind bars for years). As both sides consolidated their power, however, a rift began between them with such steps as the summoning of Fidan by the Gülenist prosecutors, changes in positions of the Gülenists within the police organization and the judiciary by the government, the December 17–25, 2013, corruption investigations by the remaining Gülenist police officers, prosecutors and judges against some ministers in the JDP government, and the shutdown by the government of the private classrooms and schools that belonged to Gülenists. The final showdown, however, came with the military putsch of July 15, 2016, which was allegedly staged by Gülen's followers within the Turkish Armed Forces following the official designation of the Gülenists as a terrorist organization by the Turkish National Security Council in May 2016. After the failure of that *coup d'état* attempt, purges of Gülenists from the bureaucracy in tens of thousands, and the clampdown on them in other spheres as well, got much speedier than ever within the framework of the fight against FETO as put in the official Turkish discourse thereafter, but these have all drawn much criticism over human rights especially from the European Union and the U.S. Added to these was the already presence of Gülen himself along with his aides in a 25-acre wooded estate in the Poconos, near Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, in the U.S. That his disciples having also been able to find refuge in the U.S. and Europe both before and after 2016 further aggravated the weight the problem of FETO imposed on Turkey's relations with the West in general, and the U.S. in particular.

15 See: https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_vol10_no1_Dani%20Rodrik.pdf.

16 See: https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/ergenekon-trials-turkey-gulen; https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23581891; https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36099889.

17 See: https://www.perseus-strategies.com/operation-sledgehammer-turkey/.

18 See: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-coup-verdict-factbox-idUSBRE9980O220131009; https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-coup-verdict-factbox-idUSBRE9980O220131009; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/25/turkey-sledgehammer-coup-trial-verdict.

19 See: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkish-court-acquits-hundreds-in-sledgehammer-case/61933.

President Trump came to office under these circumstances, and the Erdoğan Administration was very hopeful that under Trump's presidency, Gülen and his disciples might be extradited to Turkey, one of Trump's close aides, Michael Flynn, who would also serve as his first National Security Adviser for a brief period, was sending positive messages over the issue (Türkeş and Akdan, 2018, pp. 284-287). This was more the case, given the former U.S. administrations' complacency over the problem. Yet Turkish hopes were dashed by the Trump Administration's inaction on this issue, and the situation began to get even worse when some U.S. citizens as well as officials employed in U.S. consulates were also arrested within the context of the FETO investigations in Turkey. Among these, there are some U.S. citizens who were detained for brief periods, some of whom were of Turkish descent are still behind bars, including a NASA scientist of Turkish descent, as well as officials employed in U.S. consulates in Turkey who do not have U.S. citizenship, who have or had been under arrest in different forms and have been convicted in the meantime, and, finally, Pastor Andrew Craig Brunson.

Brunson's arrest arrest became an international affair in its own right. His case evolved into a crisis in bilateral relations and turned into a showdown between Trump and Erdoğan, during which reciprocal statements and even threats were issued in both formal and informal ways including tweets on Twitter. As the expectations from the Trump Administration were dashed and bilateral relations soured, to break the deadlock, the Erdoğan Administration opportunistically sought to turn the Brunson affair into a deal between the two countries in the form of a swap—the release of Brunson for the extradition of Gülen and/or dropping all the legal cases against the Turkish state-owned Halkbank.

When arrested in October 2016, the evangelical pastor was serving in a small Protestant church in Izmir, where he had been living for more than two decades. The charges against him were both FETO- and PKK-related, and so were criticized as being unsubstantiated and based rather on secret witnesses' testimonies (Cupolo, 2018). The Western public opinion initially expected that his release would not take long taking into consideration his seemingly peaceful religious activities, but the Turkish courts went on to decide in favor of the continuation of his arrest, and the only change was that he was being moved from one jail to another. Given also that he was the only U.S. citizen without Turkish descent who

stayed so long in a Turkish prison. His protracted arrest attracted a great deal of attention in the U.S., which was magnified by Brunson's evangelical religious background. Given the fact that Vice President Mike Pence had a direct link with evangelical groups in U.S., the Trump Administration had a priority of ensuring the release of Pastor Brunson. The issue was brought up by Trump in his conversation with Erdoğan on May 13, 2017.[20] Erdoğan was, indeed, busy with domestic politics in the face of ongoing legal changes following Turkey's referendum on April 16, 2017, on constitutional changes that would bring about a transition from a parliamentary to a presidential governance system, and he was preparing for the next elections that would be the first of its kind under the new governance system. Thus, he was quick to see both the importance attached by the U.S. to Brunson's arrest and the opportunity to benefit from presenting Brunson as a foreign conspirator within a nationalist rhetoric during these elections. Erdoğan's JDP aligned itself with the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) in a formal electoral alliance called "People's Alliance," as opposed to the "Alliance of the Nation" formed by the Republican People's Party (RPP), the Good Party (GP), the Felicity Party (FP), and the Democratic Party (DP). Accordingly, he called for a swap by stating, "we have given you all the documents necessary [for the extradition of Gülen]. But they say, 'give us the pastor.' You have another pastor in your hands. Give us that pastor and we will do what we can in the judiciary to give you this one," on September 28, 2017, implying swapping Brunson with Gülen, describing both religious men as pastors despite their different religions.[21] Asked about Erdoğan's remarks, Heather Nauert, then Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State, told reporters during a press briefing on the same day, "I can't imagine that we would go down that road."[22] Meanwhile, reports in the Western press drew attention to the executive decree issued in August 2017 that gave the Turkish president authority to approve the exchange of foreigners detained or convicted in Turkey with people held in other countries "in situations required by national security or national interests," whereas anonymous U.S. officials were reported to

20 Retrieved from: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-21/how-pastor-s-plight-compounded-turkey-s-economic-woes-quicktake.

21 Retrieved from: https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/give-us-gulen-if-you-want-arrested-pastor-andrew-brunson-to-be-freed-erdogan-tells-us-120084.

22 Retrieved from: https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/washington-cant-imagine-exchanging-fethullah-gulen-with-arrested-american-pastor-120121.

have said, "the Turkish government has yet to provide enough evidence for the U.S. Justice Department to act," with respect to Turkish requests for Gülen's extradition.[23]

By March 2018, commentaries in the Western press and U.S. think tanks describing Turkey's attitude over the issue of foreigners arrested in Turkey as "hostage diplomacy" began to be published, in the face of other flash cases such as the arrest and the subsequent release of Deniz Yücel, a German journalist of Turkish descent, following pressures coming from Germany and the European Union at official levels (see, for example Schenkkan, 2018; Danforth, 2018). On April 20, 2018, a bipartisan group of 66 senators from the U.S. sent a letter to President Erdoğan, demanding the release of Pastor Brunson and warning that measures may be necessary "to ensure that the Government of Turkey respects the right of law—allowing citizens and employees of U.S. organizations to travel to, reside in, and work in Turkey without fear of persecution."[24] This letter was followed by a bipartisan bill changing the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to block the transfer of F-35 fighter jets to Turkey that was passed through the U.S. Congress in June 2018 amid concerns about the entrenchment of the Turkish judiciary over the Brunson case as well as Turkey's growing ties to Russia.[25] On July 18, 2018, President Trump tweeted President Erdoğan calling for Brunson's release, called Turkey's refusal to release Brunson as a "total disgrace," and described him as being "held hostage."[26] Later in that month, the U.S. Vice President Mike Pence also called on President Erdoğan to release Brunson or face sanctions,[27] followed again by President Trump with another tweet stating that the U.S. would impose sanctions on Turkey because of Brunson's detention.[28]

23 Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-cleric-idUSKCN1C31IK.

24 Retrieved from: https://www.tillis.senate.gov/2018/4/bipartisan-group-of-66-senators-send-letter-to-president-erdogan-demanding-release-of-pastor-andrew-brunson.

25 Retrieved from: https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/21628/senate-pushes-to-block-turkey-from-getting-its-f-35s-as-spat-over-russian-missiles-grows.

26 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1019757603570806785?s=19.

27 Retrieved from: https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/melanie-arter/pence-turkey-free-pastor-andrew-brunson-or-face-sanctions.

28 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1022502465147682817.

Brunson was transferred to house arrest on July 25, 2018, but this development did not satisfy the Trump Administration, which reportedly saw it as "too little, too late," because the development was again reportedly part of a deal brokered by U.S. officials between Turkey and Israel over releasing Brunson in return for the deportation of a Turkish woman, Ebru Özkan, being held in Israel, accused of ties to Hamas. Özkan was deported by Israel ten days before Brunson's transfer to house arrest, and Israel later confirmed that Trump had requested her release.[29] Confirming these claims, *The Washington Post* also quotes an anonymous Trump Administration official that Turkey had cheated by "'upping the ante' for Brunson," and reports that Turkey had a broad list of complaints including the U.S. failure to extradite Gülen, the investigation of Halkbank for violating Iran sanctions, and attempts by the U.S. Congress to prevent delivery of F-35 fighter jets that Turkey has already purchased.[30] *The Economist* reported that Turkey and the U.S. were "on the brink of an agreement" according to which Turkey was to release Brunson, while America would allow Mehmet Hakan Atilla, the bank's deputy general manager for international banking, convicted of violating the embargo against Iran, to serve the rest of his sentence at home, but that the deal collapsed "after Turkey's foreign minister upped the stakes, asking American officials to kill any investigation into Halkbank."[31] In the end, the feeling of the Trump Administration was that Turkey overplayed its hand. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, however, denied all these claims asking, "What possible benefit could we get from this person?"[32]

The escalation went on with sanctions imposed on August 1, 2018, by the U.S. Department of Treasury, on Turkish Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül and Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, who were considered by U.S. authorities as the two top government officials who were involved in the detention of Brunson. The sanctions were imposed within the framework

29 Retrieved from: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/andrew-brunson-turkey-lira-crisis-donald-trump-erdogan-coup-a8498061.html.

30 Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-us-will-impose-large-sanctions-on-turkey-for-detaining-american-pastor-for-nearly-two-years/2018/07/26/75dcde32-90e5-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html.

31 Retrieved from: https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/08/09/turkeys-diplomatic-crisis-is-hastening-an-economic-one.

32 Retrieved from: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/andrew-brunson-turkey-lira-crisis-donald-trump-erdogan-coup-a8498061.html.

of the Magnitsky Act, which had been passed through the U.S. Congress in 2012 to pursue Kremlin officials responsible for the death of a Russian whistleblower and later been extended to include foreigners involved in corruption and human-rights violations. *The Economist*'s comment over sanctions was that few of the Congress members who passed the act "imagined the law would ever be used against the government of a NATO ally."[33] On August 9, 2018, President Trump raised tariffs on Turkish aluminum and steel to 20 and 50 percent, respectively, whereas President Erdoğan reacted on August 14 by placing tariffs of 120 and 140 percent on U.S. cars and alcohol.[34] The lira, meanwhile, plummeted record low from 4.85 per USD at the end of July 2018 to 6.95 on August 14, 2018. A *New York Times* opinion piece by President Erdoğan was published on August 10, 2018, stating "At a time when evil continues to lurk around the world, unilateral actions against Turkey by the U.S., our ally of decades, will only serve to undermine American interests and security" (Erdoğan, 2018). The piece, reflective of the then mood in Ankara, ending as follows:

> Before it is too late, Washington must give up the misguided notion that our relationship can be asymmetrical and come to terms with the fact that Turkey has alternatives. Failure to reverse this trend of unilateralism and disrespect will require U.S. to start looking for new friends and allies (Erdoğan, 2018).

Elsewhere, Erdoğan also described U.S. actions in the case as "choosing a pastor above the strategic relationship between Ankara and Washington," and that Washington has "turned their back on" Ankara, stating that it "annoyed" and "upset" Turkey on August 11, 2018.[35] It was again this same context, within which he vowed to "not lose the economic war," while telling supporters to "ignore campaigns against Turkey," saying "they may have their dollars, but we have our people and God," after a Friday prayer on August 10, 2018.[36]

33 Retrieved from: https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/08/09/turkeys-diplomatic-crisis-is-hastening-an-economic-one.

34 See: https://www.vox.com/world/2018/8/15/17687928/turkey-united-states-tariffs-lira-andrew-brunson.

35 Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-politics-erdogan/erdogan-says-u-s-turned-its-back-on-turkey-upsetting-ankara-idUSKBN1KW0B3?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews.

36 Retrieved from: https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/if-they-have-their-dollars-we

The escalation, at least over the Brunson affair, began to wither away following Brunson's subsequent release on October 12, 2018, despite being convicted on the charge of aiding terrorism, but sentenced to time he had already served in prison. After his release, he flew from Izmir in western Turkey to a U.S. base in Germany, and then on to Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. The day after he was released, he was accepted by President Trump in the White House. The sanctions reciprocally imposed were lifted gradually thereafter but only to be replaced by others in 2019 and 2020 over Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 surface-to-air missile defense systems from Russia. On the other hand, the Trump Administration held firmly against any deal on Gülen, just as the former administration did, confounding Turkish expectations.

The Halkbank Investigation in the U.S. and the Decaying Rule of Law

The investigation by U.S. judicial authorities into Halkbank—*Türkiye Halk Bankası* (People's Bank of Turkey)—involves an alleged scheme by this state-owned Turkish bank to evade U.S. sanctions on Iran. Arguably, at very outset, it moved from the point where allegedly Gülenist police officers and prosecutors left in December 2013, when the then director general of the bank Süleyman Aslan, and Reza Zarrab (aka Rıza Sarraf as registered in Turkey), an Iranian businessman who also holds Azerbaijani and Turkish citizenships, were arrested, police reportedly discovered shoeboxes containing $4.5 million at Aslan's home, believed to be connected to corruption investigations into the JDP government of the time.[37] The JDP government reacted defensively, blamed the Gülenists, along with the U.S., for undertaking a "judicial coup" benefiting from their "parallel state structure" or "state within the state," sought to discredit the investigation, and eventually removed police officers and prosecutors from office. Then the incoming prosecutors dropped all charges against defendants.

The U.S. investigation came into open when Zarrab, who allegedly helped run the scheme to evade sanctions against Iran through exporting gold

-have-our-people-and-god-erdogan-says-135654.

37 Retrieved from: https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/ayakkabi-kutusunda-4-5-milyon-dolar-25396313.

into that country from Turkey, was arrested and prosecuted upon his arrival to the U.S. in March 2016. The initial reaction from the JDP government came again in the form of denying the allegations and claiming that Preet Bharara, the then U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, who led Zarrab's prosecution, was in collaboration with FETO members in the U.S. A year later, Mehmet Hakan Atilla, deputy head of the bank, was also arrested.[38] During the trial, Zarrab testified that the sanctions-evasion operation had knowledge and approval at top levels in Turkey, sending shock waves into the JDP government in Turkey, while President Erdoğan reportedly brought up the issue with Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. twice in their meetings in person and with President Barack Obama twice again in their conversations on phone until the Obama Administration left office in January 2017.[39] Press reports also highlight that the Erdoğan Administration saw in the incoming Trump Administration new opportunities such as the business relations between the Trump Organization and Turkish corporations.[40] *The New York Times* also claims that Geoffrey S. Berman, the former top federal prosecutor in Manhattan who led the criminal investigation into the Turkish bank, had been blocked various times in various ways by former attorney generals, allegedly under pressure from the Trump Administration.[41] Yet Atilla was convicted of five of the six counts against him, including bank fraud and conspiracies to violate the Iran sanctions, to defraud the U.S., to commit bank fraud and to commit money laundering, with having been acquitted on one count, money laundering, in January 2018, and returned to Turkey in July 2019 after serving in jail for 28 months in the U.S. Moreover, as a good sign of the backing he has had from the Erdoğan Administration,

38 Retrieved from: https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/turkish-banker-arrested-conspiring-evade-us-sanctions-against-iran-and-other-offenses.

39 Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/us/politics/trump-erdogan-halkbank.html.

40 The Trump Towers in Istanbul is the best case in point. Its biggest owner and developer was a company operating under the Doğan Holding in Turkey, one of whose prominent shareholders is Mehmet Ali Yalçındağ, who is also a member of the Presidential Policy Council on Science, Technology and Innovation. Moreover, President Trump's companies reportedly received at least $2.6 million in net income from operations in Turkey from 2015 through 2018. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/us/politics/trump-erdogan-halkbank.html.

41 Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/us/politics/trump-erdogan-halkbank.html.

he was named as the general manager at the Istanbul stock exchange in October 2019—only three months after his return to the country (he resigned on March 08, 2021).

In addition to the press reports, John Bolton, Trump's former national security adviser, also acknowledges that the U.S. Department of Treasury under the Trump Administration sought ways not to impose too large a fine on Halkbank and, if possible, drop charges against it (Bolton, 2020, pp. 184-185, 191-194, 211, 458, 469, 485). Despite all these efforts, among the defendants with charges pending have been Süleyman Aslan and Turkey's former economy minister, Mehmet Zafer Çağlayan. Illustrative of the decaying rule of law in both countries, the pending charges against Halkbank was being brought once again on the forefront just when bilateral relations were very tense as a result of Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring" into north Syria in October 2019. On October 15, 2019, the U.S. Justice Department gave the prosecutors in Manhattan approval to file charges against Halkbank. The prosecutors presented their evidence before a grand jury and secured a six-count indictment that same day, charging Halkbank with money laundering, bank fraud and conspiracy to violate the Iran sanctions. In June 2020, however, eight months after the indictment was returned, President Trump fired Berman because of his handling of the Halkbank investigation, including his blocking of proposed settlements concerning that investigation.[42]

With more defendants pending and the ultimate fine on Halkbank yet to be levied, the series of investigation into Halkbank well illustrates the degeneration at top levels as well as the decaying rule of law and the instrumentalization of justice for political purposes in both countries. If it refers to corruption on one side, it refers on the other side to the political instrumentalization of a national sanctions regime against a foreign adversary (Iran in this case) by extending that regime to a third country's (Turkey's) transactions with that adversary—albeit a NATO ally. It becomes even more difficult to consider this series of investigations as just legal processes within the U.S. judicial system, given the ebbs and flows of these investigations throughout their course, under influence of personal relations, political lobbying, and the context within which bilateral relations existed.

42 Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/us/politics/trump-erdogan-halkbank.html.

Trump's Non-Diplomatic Conduct and Sporadic Humiliations over Relations with Turkey

If the notion of "twitter diplomacy" has taken its place in the diplomacy, Trump was perhaps the foremost among its users. He did so in a rather adolescent manner, most of the time violating established diplomatic ethics and codes of conduct, especially when he was tweeting about Turkey. He tweeted to voice his support for Pastor Brunson on April 17, 2018, while he was still in jail in Turkey.[43] After several months, on August 10, 2018, in relation to Turkish entrenchment in Brunson's imprisonment, he announced the measures his Administration introduced against Turkey with the following tweet:

> I have just authorized a doubling of Tariffs on Steel and Aluminum with respect to Turkey as their currency, the Turkish Lira, slides rapidly downward against our very strong Dollar! Aluminum will now be 20% and Steel 50%. Our relations with Turkey are not good at this time!"[44]

Be it because of Erdoğan's repeatedly stated personal disgust with social media or his cautiousness to avoid further antagonizing Trump, he did not address these tweets at all apart from stating that he could "no longer keep track" of them.[45] Trump, later on October 7, 2019, when the world was shocked that the White House gave a green light to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring and hastily pulled back the U.S. troops from some positions in north Syria, so clearing the way for the Turkish incursion, posted a series of tweets, within one of which he stated, "WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT, AND ONLY FIGHT TO WIN. Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and the Kurds will now have to figure the situation out, and what they want to do with the captured ISIS fighters in their 'neighborhood.'"[46] Although the Erdoğan Administration

43 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/986432143189512192?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

44 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1027899286586109955?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

45 Retrieved from: https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-says-he-can-no-longer-keep-track-of-trumps-tweets/.

46 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1181172457811697664.

did not openly react to this beneficial action by Trump, it was indeed content that the U.S. had gotten out of their way in north Syria, even if it was for a limited area. Seven hours later, however, Trump, perhaps feeling that he had given Turkey too much, felt it necessary to warn the Erdoğan Administration by reminding Erdoğan of his earlier economic punishments incurred during the crisis over Brunson's arrest:

> As I have stated strongly before, and just to reiterate, if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey (I've done before!) They must, with Europe and others, watch over..."[47]

Even American citizens have described that tweet as "evidence of a mind bereft of reason, logic or self-control."[48] Several days later, on October 14, 2019, in the face of a possibility of an all-out war by Turkey against the Kurdish armed groups supported by the U.S., Trump, this time, needed to state, "I am fully prepared to swiftly destroy Turkey's economy if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive path," and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also said, "If Turkey doesn't stop its attack immediately, more sanctions will be coming."[49] The damage, if any, of this style of diplomacy on the Erdoğan Administration is highly controversial, given that such U.S. pressure was also instrumental in finding out "foreign enemies" for their nationalist electoral alliance with Devlet Bahçeli's NAP as well as in presenting such foreign villains as the reason why Turkey's economic problems have been aggravated by the Turkish lira's devaluation. In the end, after the Erdoğan Administration agreed with the Trump Administration to stop Operation Peace Spring, so that the Kurdish armed groups could leave the region, Trump tweeted, "Great news out of Turkey. News Conference shortly with @VP and @SecPompeo. Thank you to @RTErdogan. Millions of lives will be saved!"[50] and President Er-

47 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1181232249821388801?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

48 Retrieved from: https://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/readers/2019/10/08/president-trumps-tweet-turkey-kurds-dishonorable-desert-sun-letters/3913349002/.

49 Retrieved from: https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/14/politics/trump-turkey-sanctions-skepticism/index.html.

50 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/118488417975173

doğan responded to that, this time from his official Twitter account, by stating, "Mr. President, many more lives will be saved when we defeat terrorism, which is humanity's arch enemy. I am confident that this joint effort will promote peace and stability in our region."[51]

The war of words was not limited to tweets. It turned out that on October 16, 2019, Trump also sent a scandalous letter to Erdoğan dated October 9, 2019, again related to Turkey's military operation into north Syria, including such expressions as "Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool!" The letter was beginning with the expression identified with Trump, "Let's work out a good deal!" The warning in the letter was clear: "You don't want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy—and I will." Trump was also again reminding his coercive measures taken during the Brunson crisis: "I've already given you a little sample with respect to Pastor Brunson." He was pressing Erdoğan to "make a deal" with "General Mazloum"—Mazloum Abdi or Mazloum Kobani of the YPG forces in north Syria—reminding him also that Mazloum was "willing to make negotiate—and to make concessions that they would have never made in the past." Trump did not want Erdoğan to "let the world down" over this, and was finalizing his words, again with an *à la Trump* style, "I will call you later," after an all-the-more scandalous warning: "History will look upon you favorably if you get this done the right and humane way. It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don't happen. Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool!"[52] The letter was found so unserious that people at first thought that it was "a joke or a hoax," and the language and syntax of the letter resembled "a tense note exchange in a middle-school classroom far more than the stilted conventions of international relations" (Graham, 2019). The letter "was not taken seriously at the time, especially given its lack of diplomatic finesse," so said Gülnur Aybet, a senior adviser to Erdoğan,[53] while Turkish presidential sources also stated that "President Erdoğan received the letter, thoroughly rejected it, and put it in the bin."[54] Neither party preferred

1200?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

51 Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/rterdogan/status/1184924506747482112.

52 Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/16/us/politics/trump-letter-turkey.html.

53 Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2019/10/17/770848622/erdogan-adviser-on-turkeys-attacks-in-syria.

54 Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50080737.

to turn it into a big matter, and the crisis was soothed when the Turkish North Syria operation did not expand further.

Other Hot Spots in the U.S.-Turkey Relationship

Alongside above noted frictions over regional foreign policy differences and the conduct of diplomacy, there were hard-core disputes between the two administrations. Two are particularly noteworthy.

The Dispute Over Turkey's Acquisition of an Air Defense System

Throughout the Trump presidency, a crisis was brewing between the two NATO allies because of the unwillingness of the Trump Administration to supply the Turkey with the missile defense technology that successive U.S. administrations had also been unwilling to supply. The alternative was Turkey's participation in NATOs anti-missile shield program (Kibaroğlu, 2013),[55] which Turkey considered this to be less than satisfactory (Kibaroğlu, 2018, p. 43). So, frustrated with the way that the U.S. and NATO were dealing with Turkey's defense needs, the Erdoğan Administration decided that Turkey needed its own Air Defense System. It turned to a Russian arms supplier —Rosoboronexport (ROE), Russia's main arms exporter —to buy the Russian S-400 Air Defense System (Kibaroğlu 2019).[56]

With the first delivery of this air defense system in July 2019, the U.S response was swift and to the point.[57] It stopped accepting any additional Turkish pilots to train on F-35 fighter jets and canceled the handing over of the jets already purchased by Turkey;[58] and sought to wind down Turkey's participation in the NATO program. A month later, NATO suspended Turkey's participation in its anti-missile shield program.[59]

55 See: https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1114365; https://foreignpolicy.org.tr/nato-ballistic-missile-defence-systems-and-turkey/; https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-russia-and-looming-s-400-crisis.

56 See: https://apnews.com/article/2ec55ffb87ec494095560a1e062faf80.

57 See: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48962885.

58 See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-suspends-turkeys-participation-in-f-35-fighter-program-over-ankaras-purchase-of-russian-system/2019/04/01/c38a16be-54b6-11e9-8ef3-fbd41a2ce4d5_story.html.

59 But see: https://www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro/en/materiale/material/23.

The next development occurred towards the end of the Trump presidency, when, on December 14, 2020, the Senate sanctioned[60] the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) pursuant to Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) on the grounds that Turkey "knowingly engag[ed] in a significant transaction with Rosoboronexport (ROE), Russia's main arms export entity, by procuring the S-400 surface-to-air missile system."[61] Trump, who was far too preoccupied with his "THEY STOLE MY ELECTION VICTORY" campaign to bother with vetoing this bill. Afterall, that campaign would gain him personally over $50 million, once his 2020 campaign loans are legally repaid from the political donations he raised following his 2020 election loss.[62] The end result was that Turkey became the first NATO ally to be the subject of a CAATSA sanction. President Erdoğan reaction to the sanctions was forthright:

> What kind of alliance is this?U.S. sanctions aim to prevent Turkey's developments in the defense sector and make the country dependent once again; this decision is an attack on Turkey's sovereign rights.We will work twice as hard to make our defense industry fully in dependent.[63]

The Dispute over Turkey Isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

When Trump came into office in 2017, Turkey was already in an isolated position in the Eastern Mediterranean region as a result of its worsening relations with Israel; the deepening of its already unsettled disputes with Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration in Southern Cyprus, recognized internationally as the Republic of Cyprus; and its antagonizing

60 See: https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/chairman-risch-sanctions-on-turkey-are-result-of-erdogans-decisions.

61 Retrieved from https://www.state.gov/caatsa-section-231-imposition-of-sanctions-on-turkish-presidency-of-defense-industries/.

62 See: https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-campaign-may-use-new-donations-pay-donald-trump-36-n573291

63 Retrieved from: https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-questions-us-nato-alliance-with-turkey-condemns-sanctions-over-s-400s. See also: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-us-sanctions-erdogan-slams-sanctions-nato.

policies towards the Arab states as Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. This dramatic picture has got all the more tragic for Turkey with the discoveries of new gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean from the late 2000s onwards. New gas fields were discovered in the declared exclusive economic zones (EECs) of Israel in 2009 and 2010, of Cyprus in 2011 and 2018 and of Egypt in 2015.[64] In the face of these discoveries and drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Italy, Egypt, Greece, Southern Cyprus, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan founded the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in January 2019, which Turkey was not invited to join or even attend its meetings as an observer. Having been at odds with most of these countries, it was of no surprise that Turkey was excluded from the EMGF.

More painfully for Turkey was its abandonment by the Trump Administration. This began with the U.S.'s participation in the sixth Trilateral Greece-Southern Cyprus-Israel summit in June 2019. The U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and leaders from the three countries involved signed an agreement on the EastMed pipeline that aimed to bring Eastern Mediterranean gas to the Greek mainland via Cyprus and Crete.[65] Turkey responded to these developments by sending exploration and drill ships into Cypriot waters, each escorted by Turkish warships in May 2019. At the annual Med7 summit held in June 2019, Southern Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain expressed their condemnation of Turkey due to its activities in the disputed waters where they see as the "EU's territorial waters." They called on Turkey to "show restraint, respect the sovereign rights of Cyprus, and refrain from any such actions."[66] In a similar vein, the EU member states unanimously decided to impose sanctions on Turkey over its drilling operations in the eastern Mediterranean in July 2019. Soon after, in September 2019 the Saudi foreign minister Ibrahim bin Abdulaziz al-Assaf visited Southern Cyprus and declared Saudi support for Greek Cypriot sovereignty against Turkish and Turkish Northern Cypriot claims for drilling rights in the disputed waters. This was also followed by the U.S.'s new strategic partnership and defense agreement it signed with Greece in October 2019. Under this agreement,

64 Retrieved from https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/timeline.

65 See: https://gr.usembassy.gov/joint-declaration-between-cyprus-greece-israel-and-the-u-s-after-the-6th-trilateral-summit/.

66 Retrieved from: https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/timeline.

the U.S. would expand its naval military presence in Greece, including sending a U.S. navy fleet to Southern Cyprus.[67]

Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in November 2019 with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) This delineated their maritime border, following increased pressure from Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Russian- and Emirati-backed forces. In the same month, the European Council adopted restrictive measures in response to Turkey's drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean, which it called unauthorized; and concluded that "the framework will make it possible to sanction individuals or entities responsible for, or involved in, unauthorized drilling activities of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean." In the face of such speedy developments, the last months of 2019 also brought about the declaration by the European Council that the MoU between the GNA in Libya and Turkey "infringes on the sovereign rights of third States," and that the EU "unequivocally reaffirms its solidarity with Greece and Cyprus regarding these actions by Turkey." Then, the U.S. Congress enacted the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act. This authorized new security assistance for Cyprus and Greece, lifted the U.S. arms embargo on Cyprus, and authorized the establishment of a U.S.-Eastern Mediterranean Energy Center.[68] Trump did not veto this legislation.

The tensions went on into January 2020, with Egypt convening a ministerial-level meeting among Southern Cyprus, France, Greece, and Italy to denounce Turkey's MoU with the GNA in Libya and to push for a settlement of the crisis in Libya. In the same month, Turkey sent exploration vessels close to the new maritime border with Libya. Ostensibly as a response to the Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Turkish military support to the GNA forces in Libya, the EU member states agreed to launch a new operation in the Mediterranean to monitor Libya's UN arms embargo in February 2020. Some Turkish ships were

67 See: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/5/us-greece-hail-strategic-relationship-after-signing-defence-deal.

68 See: https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/congress-passes-menendez-rubio-bill-reshaping-us-policy-in-eastern-mediterranean_-#:~:text=The%20Eastern%20Mediterranean%20Security%20and,U.S.%20arms%20embargo%20on%20Cyprus.&text=%E2%80%9CThis%20legislation%20marks%20the%20dawn,engagement%20in%20the%20Eastern%20Mediterranean.

stopped and searched, causing an outrage in Turkey.[69] In April 2020, in an apparent move to eschew risks amid antagonistic forces, the American multinational oil and gas corporation ExxonMobil postponed its drilling activities for Southern Cyprus until 2021. A month later, in May 2020, the foreign ministers of Southern Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, and the UAE issued a joint declaration "denouncing the ongoing Turkish illegal activities in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone and its territorial waters, as they represent a clear violation of international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea."[70] Meanwhile, the European Council called on Turkey to respect the law of the sea and "the sovereignty of all EU member states over their territorial sea as well as all their sovereign rights in their maritime zones."[71] The summer of 2020 passed with Turkey and Greece reciprocally issuing NAVTEX alerts in the disputed waters.

On August 26, 2020, the Trump phoned President Erdoğan and Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis, urging them to reduce tensions and start dialogue.[72] A few days later, when, on September 1, the U.S. Senate lifted the prohibition on some arms exports to Southern Cyprus for the fiscal year 2021. This permitted the exporting of non-lethal defense equipment.[73] Again, this measure was not vetoed by Trump.

On September 3, 2020, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that Turkey and Greece had agreed to enter into technical talks at NATO. These talks were intended "to establish mechanisms for military deconfliction to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents."[74] Tensions, however, did not ease. It was announced that a military deconfliction mechanism had been agreed by both Turkey and Greece on October 1, 2020. The search for a reconciliation between the two countries con-

69 See: https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-slams-unauthorized-german-search-of-libya-bound-ship/a-55703929.

70 Retrieved from: https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/joint-declaration-adopted-by-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-cyprus-egypt-france-greece-and-the-united-arab-emirates-11052020.html.

71 Retrieved from https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/timeline.

72 See: https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-snubs-greece-kyriakos-mitsotakis-diplomatic-overtures/.

73 See: https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-cyprus-turkey-int-idUSKBN25S65D.

74 Retrieved from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_177733.htm.

tinued with the return of the two parties on January 25, 2021, after a five-year hiatus, to the "exploratory talks" addressing bilateral disputes related to the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, which had begun in 2002 but which had been ended unilaterally by Greece in 2016.[75]

In summary, Trump in response to this buildup of tension in the Eastern Mediterranean 2019 and 2020, was to give diplomatic and other support to Greece. On Trump's watch:

- The Trump Administration took no steps to advance Turkey's role in the governance of the oil and gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean region.
- The U.S. participated in the sixth Trilateral Greece-Southern Cyprus-Israel summit at which the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo and the three parties involved signed an agreement on the EastMed pipeline that would bring Eastern Mediterranean gas to the Greek mainland via Cyprus and Crete.
- The U.S. entered into a strategic partnership and defense agreement with Greece, whereby it would expand its naval military presence in Greece, including Southern Cyprus.
- U.S. Congress authorized, with Trump's acquiescence, new security assistance for Southern Cyprus and Greece and lifted the U.S. arms embargo on Southern Cyprus.
- U.S. Congress, with Trump's acquiescence, lifted the prohibition on non-lethal defense equipment exports to Southern Cyprus for the fiscal year 2021.

This left Turkey more isolated in the Eastern Mediterranean than it was under the Obama Administration, with Libya as its only ally.

Erdoğan's Farewell to Trump

It might sound ironic, but Erdoğan held the position that a continuation of Trump's presidency was preferable to the Democratic nominee Joe Biden being president, despite the many tensions in, and the deteriorating of,

75 See: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/25/greece-and-turkey-resume-maritime-talks; https://www.arabnews.com/node/1818136/world.

bilateral relations throughout Trump's presidency. It is, however, not really surprising given that not so positive messages concerning Turkey were coming from Biden, his aides and the wider Democratic Party circles. The Democratic U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, for instance, in late September 2020, in response to Trump's unclear answer to a peaceful transfer of power in the U.S. if he was to lose the November presidential elections, highlighted there was a clear difference between the U.S. and other authoritarian governments by stating, "You are not in North Korea, you are not in Turkey, you are not in Russia, Mr. President. . . .You are not in Saudi Arabia. You are in the U.S. of America. It is a democracy." She then criticized Trump's close personal relation with Erdoğan.[76]

Hence Erdoğan, not surprisingly, thanked Trump "for the sincere and determined vision [he] set out during [his] 4-year term in order for the relations between Turkey and the U.S. to improve on the basis of shared interests and values," and thanked him again at the end of the message "from the bottom of [his] heart for [his] warm friendship that [he had] always displayed."[77] The Erdoğan Administration also did not miss the opportunity to enjoy the controversies around the U.S. presidential elections initiated by Trump. He claimed that he actually won the 2020 presidential election by a big margin and that this victory was "stolen" from him by voter and voting fraud. This claim was repeated, repeatedly, aired by top level Republican Party officials. When the unrest amongst Trump supporters and allies reached to such an unprecedented level that on January 6, 2021, some far-right Trump supporters, urged on by Trump, stormed the U.S. Congress building on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, with a view to forcing Congress to reject Biden 's victory. The rioters threatening to assassinate the U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and the Democrat Speaker of the House of Representative Nancy Pelosi. President Erdoğan's statement on January 8, 2021, was the bluntest: "This situation in the U.S.—the so-called cradle of democracy—has shocked humankind. It is an unprecedented incident in American history, a disgrace for democracy."[78] When Trump's second impeachment trial for inciting an

76 Retrieved from https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/09/26/turkish-fm-threatens-pelosi-before-tagging-trump-in-same-tweet/.

77 Retrieved from https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/122749/president-erdogan-s-message-to-president-trump-of-the-u-s- (accessed (February 4, 2021)).

78 Retrieved from https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/president-erdog

insurrection on January 6 concluded with his acquittal as a result of the voting along party lines in the U.S. Senate on February 13, 2021, his personal fate as the "former U.S. President" had already lost his importance for the Erdoğan leadership.

The Erdoğan Administration was rather anxious about the incoming Biden Administration's prospective cabinet, which was sending harsh messages concerning Turkey. For instance, Anthony Blinken, who was later confirmed as Biden's secretary of state, was mentioning Turkey with such phrases as "a so-called strategic partner" and "not acting like an ally" during his Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing.[79] All this put the Erdoğan Administration in an all-the-more ambivalent position towards the Biden Administration, despite the deteriorated bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S. under Trump.

Conclusion: An Overview of the Deteriorated U.S. Relations

Although Trump and Erdoğan, seen by many as being cut from the same cloth, came up with the rhetoric that they would make their two countries come close to each other again, bilateral relations soon deteriorated and, ultimately, they got trapped in a *cul de sac* in many spheres. The foreign policy objectives defined by the two leaders were not the same. While Trump promoted a narrow American nationalism amplified in an understanding of "America First," Erdoğan hoped that his Administration would reinforce the influence of Turkey in the regional space somehow provided by the U.S., directly or indirectly, overtly or tacitly. Neither of them achieved fully the result they wanted.

The Trump Administration did not take into account Turkey's sensitive security concerns sufficiently, and, in order to achieve its ill-defined objectives, chose to apply coercive instruments to pressure Turkey. This only contributed to feelings of anti-Americanism in Turkey. The Erdoğan Administration, on the other hand, did not hesitate to demonstrate its trouble-making capacity when needed. Both showed off, but neither of them fully achieved their goals.

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an-slams-storming-of-us-capitol-as-disgrace-for-democracy.

79 Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-biden-state-turkey-idUSL1N2JU2Z6.

Both opted for wrong policy designs. The Trump Administration adopted a maximalist position: it forced Turkey to act within the framework defined by the U.S. policy makers. It relied on Kurdish paramilitary groups in Syria in its fight against ISIL and excluded Turkey on the grounds that Turkey might benefit from such endeavor, but on the other hand, successive U.S. administrations also wanted to make use of Turkish presence in the region in counterbalancing Iranian and Russian influence particularly in Syria and Iraq without deliberately addressing Turkey's national security concerns.

The Erdoğan Administration seems to have made two miscalculations. The first one was in 2009, when they believed in a fallacy of a large space would be allocated to Turkey in the Middle East by the U.S. Second, he followed a strategy that presumed his leadership and Turkey had become indispensable in the eyes of successive U.S. administrations. While the Obama Administration was arguably close to such position at the beginning, they did put it aside soon after. The Trump Administration not only failed to take into account Turkey's concerns but also disregarded its potential value and above all its strategic significance, not to mention its nuisance value.

Erdoğan obsessively hoped for a downfall of the Assad rule in Syria, assuming this would necessarily reinforce Turkey's position in Syria. The Trump Administration—following Obama 's strategy in the latter years of his presidency (2014-2016)—enhanced its relations with Kurdish paramilitary groups. Despite all this, Erdoğan still kept his fingers crossed that Trump would need Turkey following a wishful regime change in Syria, undertaken or at least triggered by the Trump Administration, but he did so in vain.

Although there was a clear asymmetric power imbalance between Turkey and the U.S., Erdoğan skillfully escaped from further pressure as Russian President Putin offered an avenue for him in return for entering into closer relations with Russia and Iran in Syria. Erdoğan's diplomatic maneuvering ability helped him alleviate the U.S. diplomatic pressure at least to some extent. When it comes to the air defense system, however, while Turkish policy makers presented the case as a matter of national sovereignty, successive U.S. administrations took it as a matter that exceeded the limits of national sovereignty and reached a level as high as collective defense at the NATO level.

Interesting enough is that while Trump enjoyed *ad hoc* agreements based on *a la carte* model with some other actors, Turkey was deprived from making use of such *a la carte* agreements. It is the Erdoğan Administration, which advocated *ad hoc* agreements based on *a la carte* model with not only Russia, but also hoped that the same model would work with the U.S. and EU member states, yet he was refused by erstwhile allies, whereas he welcomed by its recent friend—the Russian Federation.

In view of this, the Trump Administration not only increased its pressure on the Erdoğan Administration in military matters, but it also gave a clear message to Turkey's neighboring countries to encourage them act against Turkey, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean region. In other words, Turkey would be pushed into a corner with no choice but to act within the framework already defined by the principal Western powers—the U.S. and the EU. The Erdoğan Administration responded to that by showcasing Turkey's trouble-making capacity in every opportunity it found. Although Turkey was able to remind that its potential to pose troubles is no less, both sides failed to persuade each other into their own understandings of how to overcome differences without finding any *via media*—only a *cul de sac*—at hand in bilateral relations.

It may be concluded that the tensions between the two countries increased under the Trump and Erdoğan Administrations. They exhausted their potentials to normalize relations. They failed to find out how they could commensurate and conflate their interests. The Trump Administration acted in line with its great power status, sought to advance narrow American interests, as opposed to sensitive Turkish ones, the Erdoğan Administration, who sought to play the role of a larger regional actor, was confined by its former ally. Hence tensions continued to increase. In the last months of the Trump Administration, the two countries' relations entered into a *cul de sac*.

Last—but certainly not least—it remains to be seen whether the Biden and Erdoğan Administrations will save the bilateral relations or not; otherwise sooner or later the question is likely to be—who lost Turkey!

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