

TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS AND US-TURKEY RELATIONS

US President Donald Trump's potential to unravel traditional American foreign policy through his own robust personal style has rattled not only Washington, but also American allies around the globe. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in contrast, has seized this opportunity to court Trump and his administration with the prospect of renewing vows between the two strategic NATO allies after a falling out with the US towards the end of the Obama administration. However, while Erdoğan and his presidential palace have probed Trump's White House for answers to several questions critical to bilateral relations, 100 days into the new administration – the initial point of reflection on the actions of the US president – many key issues remain between the US and Turkey.

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The major leaders of the Western world largely shuddered amid the new US president's bold and controversial cry of "America First!" following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States on 20 January 2017. In contrast, the leader of America's long-standing NATO ally Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed optimism and firm support of the new administration. While the US-Turkey alliance has traditionally centered on a "strategic partnership" with its security alliance rooted in NATO, the prospective remodeling of the US-Turkey relationship had been imagined through the dramatic changing of the US presidential guard and Erdoğan's view to determining the potential political and security benefits garnered from a strong relationship with this unorthodox US leader.¹

Ever since Donald Trump clenched the Republican Party's presidential nomination in the summer of 2016, President Erdoğan has been eager to work with Trump, who won over the Turkish leader and his followers by applauding Erdoğan's ability to counter the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, as well as with his reluctance to comment on the nature of Turkey's post-coup purges.² The relation between the two leaders' barbed political rhetoric, distaste for the political establishment, and questioning of NATO (at least initially in the case of Trump), as well as their loathing of outgoing US President Barack Obama, have certainly mirrored one another and inspired hope in Ankara that the presidents' personas may close the gap in US-Turkey ties. This personal similarity, however, has stood in contrast to the US' foreign and defense policies and policy-makers influencing Trump, which, at least in terms of their positions on Turkey and their obligations to US rules and laws, have not changed despite the inauguration of a new US leader. The changing face of American foreign policy as a whole under the Trump administration has certainly disrupted politics and foreign policy-making in Washington. However, aside from the Trump administration's willingness to brush aside human rights issues for Erdoğan, the bulk of the Washington "insiders" and "outsiders" calling the shots and influencing the president's ear have not changed the game toward Turkey's interests.

Despite Ankara's increased willingness to work with the Trump administration, the issues most essential to Ankara, which had previously eroded US-Turkey relations under the Obama administration, have continued to plague the US-Turkey alliance and are by no means in line to be quickly resolved within the respective US institutions. These are the US security collaboration with the Democratic Union

¹ A current, comprehensive summary of US-Turkish relations was carried out by Aslı Aydintaşbaş and Kemal Kirişçi prior to the Turkish constitutional referendum on 16 April 2017. See, Aslı Aydintaşbaş and Kemal Kirişçi, "The US and Turkey: Friends, Enemies, or Only Interests," *Turkey Project Policy Paper* No. 12, (Washing, DC: Brookings Institute), April 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/aydintasbas-kirischi_united-states-and-turkey.pdf

² "Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey's Coup Attempt and the World," *The New York Times*, 21 July 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html?_r=0

Party/People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG), which Ankara sees as one and the same to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish imam living in self-exile in the US whom Turkey holds responsible for leading the July 15th coup attempt; and the arrests of Turkish-Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab and Halkbank deputy CEO Mehmet Hakan Atilla, both of who have been arrested on charges of evading US sanctions against Iran and are suspected of having ties to the Turkish government.

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This article, situated around the first 100 days of Trump's presidency – with 100 days referring to a historic period of action and examination for a newly inaugurated US president – will provide a brief discussion of how the US-Turkey relationship can be expected to develop within the initial period of the Trump administration.³ It will draw attention to the bilateral tension over the YPG and Gülen, as well as Zarrab and Atilla. Although the first “100 days” can be said to be an arbitrary benchmark of a president's success, it does give one ample time to judge a president's initial outputs and, more importantly, pause for reflection. In the case of US-Turkey relations, one should be cautious that 100 days does not make for a full study of the relationship. However, in examining this key strategic partnership at a critical time in its history, the remaining tension between the two allies as well as their interactions ought to be firmly considered within this frame.

The US-Turkey Kurdish Question: Diverging Security Partners in Syria

The fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq has become one of the leading sources of tension between the US and Turkey. Since the US began to take serious measures against ISIS at the end of 2014, Turkey started to take aim at not who the US was fighting, but with whom it was fighting. After vetting a number of other Syrian opposition forces with no success, the US trained and partnered with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose composition is dominated by the YPG.

³ The information for this article is largely garnered from open sources as well as interviews and discussions with academics and experts who confirmed the information in open sources and several of the author's own hypotheses in previously written analyses. I would like to thank all those who gave their time and energy, including my colleagues at IPC, in presenting their insights and discussing the US-Turkish relationship with me. Please find my previous analyses published in *Hurriyet Daily News* within the past three months: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=260&at=megan%20giscion&sbmt=1>

“The issues most essential to Ankara, which had previously eroded US-Turkey relations under the Obama administration, have continued to plague the alliance.”

On the one hand, the US security partnership with the Syrian Kurdish YPG rightfully ought to come as a shocking offense to Ankara, who views the YPG as an extension of the PKK – who both the US and Turkey identify as a terrorist organization – because of the PYD/YPG’s allegiance to jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.⁴ On the other hand, the partnership should come as only a small surprise given the US partnership with other Kurdish groups both before and after the Iraq war.⁵ Ankara might have noted that this is the not first time that the US’ has turned to “the Kurds” for support in the face of embattled relations with Turkey. Meanwhile, the US military may not have noticed the political and ideological disparities between the many colors of “the Kurds” in Turkey’s region, especially in face of the threat of ISIS on the battlefield and its hold on the minds of the American public. To look at the partnership in the most practical terms, for commanders in the US military, the YPG offers a battle-tested force to combat ISIS and has thus far proved to be a reliable, local, and combat-ready partner.⁶ After experimenting with other “moderate” Syrian forces, the YPG is simply the most complete force ready at the right place at the right time – despite Turkish concerns.

With President Trump’s tough talk against ISIS in the 2016 presidential campaign, Ankara had bet on the idea that, if it played its cards right, it could convince the Trump administration to remove the YPG from the picture. This would effectively diminish the YPG’s status in the post-ISIS setting, and the Turks and the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) would instead be fighting alongside the US as Ankara had envisioned. Trump’s immediate prioritization of the fight against ISIS following his inauguration – having asked the Pentagon to develop a clear strategy within 30 days, by the end of February 2017, toward ISIS full and quick demolition

⁴ Although the US State Department does identify the PKK as a terrorist organization, no other armed Kurdish-led group has made the US terrorist list as of May 2017. The US government does not collectively identify the link between the PKK and the PYD/YPG. See, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

⁵ For a deeper understanding of the tension between Turkey and the US during the Iraq war, see: William Hale, *Turkey, the US and Iraq*, SOAS Middle East Issues (London: London Middle East Institute at SOAS, 2007). Perhaps most significantly in US commander’s minds is when the US found itself working with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – presently an ally of Ankara – because of their willingness to allow US forces to parachute into northern Iraq after the Turkish parliament denied America’s request to launch the US invasion of Iraq from Turkey.

⁶ Michael Stephens and Aaron Stein, “The YPG: America’s New Best Friend?,” *Al Jazeera*, 28 June 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/06/ypg-america-friend-isil-kurds-syria-150627073034776.html>

– was Ankara's first and last chance to get in on the development of the Pentagon's "new" plan. In this, it did not succeed.⁷

The reappointment of key actors from the Obama administration within the Trump administration, such as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk who is known to favor working with the YPG, was Ankara's first sign that the new administration would not be easily convinced of abandoning Turkey's enemy. The appointment of General James

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Mattis as Secretary of Defense, as well as a number of leading generals who earned their stars at the US Central Command (CENTCOM) amid strained US-Turkey ties during the Iraq war, including Trump's second National Security Advisor Lt General H.R. McMaster, was a further sign of trouble for Turkey. Before and after Trump taking office, CENTCOM has most fervidly defended the US' partnership with the YPG. The Pentagon's "new" plan – to no one's surprise in Washington – was thus a whole lot like that of the Obama administration's strategy. What perhaps further sealed the deal with the YPG and tarnished Turkey's opportunity was the Turkish siege of al-Bab, marking the end of Operation Euphrates Shield. Amid confusion upon Turkey's seemingly abrupt end of the battle, it took the second largest army in NATO over 30 days to combat the weakened non-state ISIS force and liberate one city.⁸ Turkey's failure to deliver a cohesive plan for the battle of Raqqa, a huge bilateral point of tension given the US plan to involve the YPG on the ground instead of Turkish forces, further sidelined the Turkish military in US battle plans for northern Syria.⁹ Unlike the Turks, whose eyes were turned elsewhere in the midst of their own domestic struggles both within the army and in fighting the PKK, the US' focus had been on Raqqa far before Trump's presidency, and thus, the YPG had long been ready for this battle as the US' local partner.

Trump's airstrikes against Assad's use of chemical weapons in Idlib in early April 2017 excited the Turkish government into revamping its support for US action in Syria. However, Turkish airstrikes carried out against the PKK/YPG were not met

⁷ Phillip Rucker and Missy Ryan, "Trump Orders Pentagon to Draft Isis Strategy, Restructuring of Security Council" *The Washington Post*, 28 January 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2017/01/28/trump-to-order-joint-chiefs-to-draft-isis-strategy-restructure-security-council/?utm_term=.781361b34df1

⁸ Cengiz Candar, "What's Really Happening in Syria's Al-Bab?" *Al Monitor*, 21 February 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/turkey-syria-is-al-bab-really-in-turkish-hands.html>

⁹ Sami Nakhoul and Nick Tattersall, "Turkey, US on Collision Course over Kurdish Role in Battle of Syria's Raqqa," *Reuters*, 2 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-usa-analy-idUSKBN169250>

“Trump’s airstrikes against Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Idlib in early April 2017 excited the Turkish government into revamping its support for US action in Syria.”

with any reciprocal amount of joy within the US government. Disapproving remarks came from the US State Department and the Pentagon,¹⁰ in addition to angry tweets from CENTCOM, with only the White House remaining silent to the issue.¹¹ The airstrikes killed 20 US YPG partner forces as well as endangered the lives of numerous US forces, who were not warned of the attack in time to properly vacate the area. While it is unclear for the US what signal the airstrikes were exactly trying to elicit, the strikes tensed up Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who allegedly yelled at his Turkish counterpart Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavuçoğlu on the phone following the incident.¹² These airstrikes were possibly the last signal from within the first 100 days that the Pentagon and CENTCOM took into account, which certainly reassured their assessment of the irresponsible and unreliable nature of the Turkish alliance.

Amid rifts on the ground between the US, Turkey, and the YPG, it has seemingly been through the nature of the historic US-Turkey alliance that the Trump administration has initially continued to consider further opportunities to work with Turkey on strategic plans for Syria and Iraq. Counter to the urgency of the Pentagon’s February plan, the Trump administration patiently adapted a “wait and see” tactic for establishing battle plans in Syria until after the April 16th constitutional referendum in Turkey with the primary hope of not influencing Turkish politics.¹³ However, while some in Washington have noted the sensitivity of Turkish politics concerning the YPG in Syria, it is best to see the role of President Trump in this matter as the Commander-in-Chief of the US Armed Forces: A role in which, given his inexperience in security matters, he is most likely to seek the advice of his top generals, who are in turn seeking partnership with the YPG.¹⁴ The battle against ISIS has indeed

¹⁰ Shawn Snow, “Pentagon: Turkish Airstrikes Put US Forces at Risk,” *Military Times*, 26 April 2017, <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/pentagon-turkish-airstrikes-put-us-forces-at-risk>; “US Says Raised Deep Concerns with Turkey over Air Strikes,” *Reuters*, 25 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-usa-idUSKBN17R2H2>.

¹¹ U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), *Twitter* post, 26 April 2017, 9:48 a.m., <https://twitter.com/CENTCOM>.

¹² Amberin Zaman, “Us, Turkish Nerves Fray as Erdoğan Visit Nears” *Al Monitor*, 2 May 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/mevlut-cavucoglu-rex-tillerson-talk-strikes.html>

¹³ Nicholas Schmidle, “What Mike Flynn Did for Turkey,” *The New Yorker*, 16 March 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-mike-flynn-did-for-turkey>.

¹⁴ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Trump’s Next Task: Learning the Limits of Military Power,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 May 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/trumps-next-task-learning-the-limits-of-military-power/>

been discussed as a primary component of every call between Trump and Erdoğan as well as their staff, but in the end one can speculate that these conversations have more often than not led to disagreements and dead ends.¹⁵

Concluding Trump's first 100 days, US troops have been stationed along Turkey's border with Syria in order to keep the peace between Turkey and the YPG. The US has found itself entrenched not only in the battle against ISIS, but now in deterring the use of force from its NATO ally against its strategic Kurdish partner. US-Turkey relations, as well as the battle against ISIS, will largely depend on this capacity to maintain stability between the two opposing forces, which will become exceedingly difficult in light of President Trump's early May decision to directly arm the YPG.¹⁶ As the US government continues to invest in this partner force, the Trump administration will seemingly not change its mind on the YPG in the near future.

“The White House’s focus on security over values has already been reflected in its relationship with Turkey within the first 100 days of Trump’s presidency.”

The Case of Fethullah Gülen: More Files, Scandal, and the Obstacle of Law

While the promise of revitalizing relations between Turkey and the US has been primarily driven by the ascent into office of one man, Donald Trump, one man has also remained as one of greatest obstacles to the relationship: Fethullah Gülen. Since the July 15th coup attempt, the Turkish government has fervidly sought Gülen's extradition and return to Turkey in order to stand trial for his alleged role in the plot. The request for Gülen's extradition was filed quickly following July 15th. However, as requested by US officials in the Department of Justice – the US government agency primarily responsible for processing extraditions – Turkey's evidence has had to be filed and re-filed several times in order to ensure the integrity of its content.¹⁷ The investigation into Gülen's role on the night of July 15th has been a key factor increasing anti-American sentiment within Turkey, in which many see Gülen as

¹⁵ For the transcripts of these calls, see the US Department of State website at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/17/readout-president-donald-j-trumps-call-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan>, 17 April 2017; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/07/readout-presidents-call-president-recep-tayyip-erdo%C4%9Fan-turkey>, 7 February 2017.

¹⁶ Barin Kayaoglu, “Turkey Angry, Stoic with Us Decision to Arm Syrian Kurds,” *Al Monitor*, 10 May 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-stoic-us-arms-syrian-kurds.html>

¹⁷ The Turkish Ministry of Justice was still submitting files to US officials at the time of writing. See, “Justice Minister in US over Gülen's Extradition Demand,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, 6 May 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/justice-minister-in-us-over-Gulens-extradition-demand.aspx?pageID=238&nID=112795&NewsCatID=510>

a smaller pawn in a larger conspiracy run by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It is obvious from the US perspective that the length of the ongoing investigation – now spanning several months and two presidential administrations – has been chief among the factors frustrating Turkey.

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There is a sharp contrast between how the US and Turkey view their roles in the case. Ankara has used several damaging rhetorical musings in an attempt to get its point across to the US government and public. It has harped upon its public support in the matter: According to the survey carried out by Andy-Ar, a Turkish survey company close to the government, nearly two-thirds of all Turks believe that Gülen orchestrated the coup attempt.¹⁸ And the Turkish government has argued that while the

US harbors “Turkey’s Osama bin Laden,” the Turks would have extradited such an existential threat to the US already.¹⁹ On the one side, Ankara has drawn a picture of the US moving against the Turkish population and sitting idly in the face of a NATO ally’s greatest time of need. On the other, the US sees that it has not only thoroughly dedicated time to examining and processing Turkey’s files, but it has also extended a helping hand in aiding Ankara’s preparation of evidence against Gülen. Nearly one month after the failed coup, the US Justice and State Departments sent a delegation to meet with Turkish officials to discuss Gülen’s case.²⁰ A team of US attorneys was assigned to help Ankara gather the proper documentation needed for submission to the Department of Justice. Even high-brow American publications such as *The New Yorker* have drawn attention to Gülen’s involvement in the coup and his long-term threat to Turkish society.²¹

Within the first 100 days of the Trump administration, Ankara has increasingly sought the rapid advancement of Gülen’s extradition, seemingly without any new strategy other than heavy persistence to convince Trump’s team. Whether the Turkish

¹⁸ “Turks Believe Gülen Was behind Coup Attempt: Survey,” *Reuters*, 26 July 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-Gülen-idUSKCN12R2LG>

¹⁹ Justin Fishel, “Turkish Justice Minister: Fethullah Gülen Is Our Osama bin Laden,” *ABC News*, 27 October 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/turkish-justice-minister-fethullah-Gülen-osama-bin-laden/story?id=43111790>

²⁰ “US to Send Delegation to Turkey for Gülen Probe: Official,” *Reuters*, 20 August 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-usa-idUSKCN10V0GB>

²¹ Dexter Filkins, “Turkey’s Thirty-Year Coup,” *The New Yorker*, 17 October 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup>

government saw Trump's strong leadership as executive entitlement to illegally extract Gülen or that it thought Trump could somehow override Obama's judicial system remains unclear. Trump's former National Security Advisor (then campaign advisor) Mike Flynn's Election Day op-ed attempting to rally support behind Gülen's extradition certainly did much to arouse hope among the Turkish public that the Trump administration could make Gülen a priority.²² Before being embarrassingly fired for the second time by a US president, Flynn and President Trump's previous confidence in him were indeed a convincing show of support for Ankara in Washington. This, perhaps, justified the Turkish government's thinking that it could somehow expedite Gülen's extradition. Since day one of Turkey's meetings with the new administration, no matter the office or person, Ankara has sought to clarify and discuss Gülen's extradition with voices across the board in Washington, including the State Department and the White House. The phrase "discussed the extradition of Fethullah Gülen" is touted on almost all of the Turkish government's official readouts of calls and reports of meetings with US officials. But for Washington, discussion of this issue is not a highlight in the readouts or interviews upon meeting with Ankara.

Scandals over the matter involving whispers of the extra judicial and illegal kidnapping of Gülen sealed Washington's reluctance to speed up any deal on Ankara's cause. First, with Flynn's forced resignation and, second, with revelations among the American public that Flynn was lobbying for businessmen related to the Turkish government, these scenarios were problematic not only in that Turkey lost its chief voice in Washington but also in further harming perceptions of Turkey in America.²³ The ultimate scandal came in March when former CIA director James Woolsey accused Flynn of holding a meeting with senior Turkish officials in which they allegedly discussed whisking away Gülen in the middle of the night in order to extra judicially remove him from US soil.²⁴ With Flynn's fall from grace surrounding this issue, in addition to his links to Russia, it can be easily imagined why no US official would wish to discuss Gülen in any setting outside a court of law. To avoid the exploitation of this scandal, the White House's ear to the issue had to be turned.

Within this setting, it is more importantly still not clear that Turkey understands the American judicial system.²⁵ The US extradition process, like any legal process

²² Mike Flynn, "Our Ally Turkey Is in Crisis and Needs Our Support," *The Hill*, 8 November 2016, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreign-policy/305021-our-ally-turkey-is-in-crisis-and-needs-our-support>

²³ Peter Baker and Matthew Rosenberg, "Michael Flynn was Paid to Represent Turkey's Interests During Trump Campaign," *The New York Times*, 10 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/us/politics/michael-flynn-turkey.html>

²⁴ James V. Grimaldi, Dion Nissenbaum, and Margaret Coker, "Ex-CIA Director: Mike Flynn and Turkish Officials Discussed Removal of Erdoğan Foe From US," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ex-cia-director-mike-flynn-and-turkish-officials-discussed-removal-of-erdogan-foe-from-u-s-1490380426>

²⁵ The most comprehensive analysis of the US extradition process and the case of Fethullah Gülen is: Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, "The Process Behind Turkey's Proposed Extradition of Fethullah Gülen," *The Center for American Progress*, Washington DC, 7 September 2016, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/09/07/143587/the-process-behind-turkeys-proposed-extradition-of-fethullah-gulen/>

in the US, is notably a long-term process that requires rigorous paper work and patience. While it is confusing for US officials as to why the Turkish government need bring up Gülen's extradition in every bilateral discussion, it ought to be more alarming that the Turkish government's official rhetoric hardly acknowledges the US judiciary's role in the extradition process. The issue has been and continues to be politicized, barely allowing room for any discussion on legal procedures and the rule of law.

As a disappointment to Turkish officials, the first 100 days has shown that Gülen's case will continue to crawl within the confines of the Department of Justice and the US judicial system. While the Trump administration already lost its greatest challenge to the US courts – seen within the case of Trump's "Muslim Ban" – within its first 100 days, it is unlikely that Trump will stick his neck out in front of the courts over a seedy Turkish imam threatening Turkey.²⁶ In such a case, Trump would likely lose his head to the judicial gavel. Faint is the Turkish memory of when the George W. Bush administration challenged the legal residency of Gülen, only to have their decision overturned by the US courts.²⁷ The American executive has little power in this situation. Meetings between the Turkish Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ and US Attorney General Jeff Sessions, such as the one scheduled in the lead-up to President Erdoğan's mid-May Washington visit, are the best ways that Turkey may get its point across to the US government.

Shifting US Focus

While the outlook of the US-Turkey alliance has always held a strategic focus, the first 100 days of the Trump administration has heralded a new tone in foreign policy, part of which is reflected in its relationship with Turkey. In contrast to US foreign policy since World War II, Secretary Tillerson has called for a new American outlook in which the US will no longer condition its national security partnerships based on the acceptance of American values.²⁸

The White House's focus on security over values has already been reflected in its relationship with Turkey within the first 100 days of Trump's presidency. While the Obama administration had openly criticized Erdoğan and his human rights

²⁶ See David J. Lynch, "Trump's Battle with Judges Sets Stage for Constitutional Showdown," *Financial Times*, 10 February 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/48b29e76-ef18-11e6-930f-061b01e23655>

²⁷ See *Gülen v. Chertoff* (2008), US Government Publishing Office, https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-paed-2_07-cv-02148/content-detail.html

²⁸ Tillerson's speech on the matter can be seen here: Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks to US Department of State Employees," US Department of State, 3 May 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/05/270620.htm>; One reaction to this turn in foreign policy from a previous State Department official is: Eliot Cohen, "Rex Tillerson Doesn't Understand America," *The Atlantic*, 5 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/rextillerson-speaks/525567/>

record since his crackdowns on protesters in Gezi Park in 2013, in contrast, the Trump administration was the lone Western voice in congratulating the Turkish president for his win after the 16 April referendum transitioning to the presidential system, which international observers deemed did not take place under free or fair circumstances in Turkey.²⁹ The disparity between the two presidencies is, in many ways, huge. In light of the overall Western opinion of Turkey, this phone call deeply swings toward Erdoğan's favor and increases the odds that the new US administration is willing to overlook human rights violations in Turkey in hopes of stability and security.

“One thing can be sure of Trump: His transactional character will remain a primary component of (or for some, obstacle in) US foreign policy.”

According to Michael Werz, a national security expert with a focus on Turkey at the Center for American Progress, “the phone call between Trump and Erdoğan was indicative of a) the dysfunctionality of the US government and b) a radical change in US policy with regards to human rights.”³⁰ The Department of State was more cautious of issuing a statement on the Turkish referendum and reportedly advised against any quick communication on the subject; however, reports stated that Rex Tillerson was allegedly in the same room as Trump during the post-referendum call, which further incites Trump's possible lack of understanding of Turkish politics as well as his rejection of Tillerson's department. It is no secret that the Trump White House is willing to take charge of the State Department's arm of diplomacy when the president sees fit to do so – between denying Tillerson the ability to appoint key diplomats within his office to cutting the department's staff by nearly 30 percent.³¹ Trump's interference in the US' Turkey policy is no exception to this case. This has created uproar in Washington throughout the foreign policy establishment. But with a lack of established figures within the new Trump team, little can be done aside from speaking out.

Although Trump's phone call can be seen as a foreign policy victory for Erdoğan, it is important to be cautious of other institutions' views of Turkey. With a very fickle and uncertain American president in power, one may never know when his opinion may change or by who it may be swayed. It is possible that on a whim Trump's personally

²⁹ “Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017,” OSCE, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/303681>

³⁰ Email correspondence between Michael Werz and the author, 24 April 2017.

³¹ See Julia Ioffe, “The State of Trump's State Department,” *The Atlantic*, 1 March 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/state-department-trump/517965/>

colored congeniality toward Erdoğan may not last another 100 days. It could be that Trump wants nothing more than to challenge the American foreign policy status quo and win over another “authoritarian” figure – of which the US media keenly labels President Erdoğan alongside Egypt’s el-Sisi, Russia’s Putin, China’s Xi, and North Korea’s Kim Jong-un.³² Perhaps this is in order to spite the Obama legacy, which at least in rhetoric attempted to publicly address human rights issues. Or, it could be that like with Assad, Trump’s mind could be changed by something he saw on TV.

One thing can be sure of Trump in the coming days: His transactional character will remain a primary component of (or for some, obstacle in) US foreign policy. Ankara must continue to meet these transactions halfway in order to continue to curry Trump’s favor.

At 100 Days’ Conclusion, More Question Marks Raised

In conclusion, while the fate of the US’ partnership with the YPG and the case of Fethullah Gülen will seemingly remain unchanged in light of the new administration, it is perhaps important to look into the arrests of Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab and Halkbank deputy CEO Mehmet Hakan Atilla before suspending this assessment of Trump and Erdoğan’s bilateral diplomacy within the first 100 days of Trump’s presidency. The voluntary appointment of former New York City mayor and Trump supporter Rudy Giuliani, alongside former Attorney General Michael Mukasey as defense attorney for Zarrab, calls into question the extent to which the Trump administration has vested its interests in maintaining its relationship with Turkey. Giuliani, whose bank Greenberg Traurig is registered as a Turkish agent, has been questioned by US prosecutors for his relations to Zarrab and whether the Iranian, US, or Turkish governments have hired him for his role as defense lawyer.³³ Giuliani recognized the politics of the matter in April as he filed an affidavit claiming that both US and Turkish officials were “receptive” to a diplomatic deal in the Zarrab case, and Mukasey drew the attorneys’ visit to Turkey as a means to “a state-to-state resolution of the case.”³⁴ As both Trump and Erdoğan hope the case and Giuliani’s role in it will not suffer the same fate as Mike Flynn, the potential scandal is the latest incident involving both a Trump official and a businessman

³² Gregory Krieg, “President Trump Has a Long History of Praise for Autocrats, Dictators and Strongmen,” *CNN*, 18 April 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/06/politics/donald-trump-favorite-dictators-and-strongmen/>. A good discussion of Trump’s motivations for his post-referendum call can be seen in David A. Graham, “What’s So Bad About Trump Calling Erdoğan?” *The Atlantic*, 18 April 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/Erdoğan-trump/523362/>

³³ Brendan Pierson, “US Judge Asks If Turkish Gold Trader’s Lawyers Work for Iran,” *Reuters*, 1 May 2017, <http://af.reuters.com/article/metalsNews/idAFL1N1I314G>

³⁴ Benjamin Weiser and Patrick Kingsley, “Why Giuliani Held a Secret Meeting with Turkey’s Leader,” *The New York Times*, 20 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/nyregion/rudy-giuliani-reza-zarrab-iran-sanctions-case.html?src=twr&smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0

allegedly close to the Turkish government. Giuliani's personal ties to Trump call into question why the Zarrab case would warrant a political deal, especially from the US side. With opaque cases such as these squandering the public perception of US-Turkey ties, it can be further asked for what precise reasons Trump and Erdoğan are inclined to personally interact on behalf of themselves or on behalf of their country.

“The 16 May 2017 meeting was clearly designed to save face between the two allies, not to develop permanent solutions to the tensions underlying US-Turkish relations.”

In the first 100 days of the Trump administration, it can be gleaned that while the US and Turkey may have similar interests, such as fighting ISIS and stabilizing Turkey's region, the two allies have competing means of pursuing those interests. In contrast to narratives that Trump and Erdoğan would have been able to solve all their problems and come to a consensus upon meeting, it seems that both are inclined to follow the paths laid down before them, which certainly will not meet for the foreseeable future. Trump's personality, transactionalism, and reliance on the US military to develop policies in Syria and Iraq have demonstratively shaped the US-Turkey alliance within the administration's first 100 days – in some ways towards but by and large away from Turkey's interests. Even if Erdoğan could convince Trump to change his mind on certain strategies, the issues from the US side are simply too big to be changed by the office of one man, especially as he is struggling to gain his presidential bearings.

After Erdoğan and Trump's first meeting on 16 May 2017, it can be concluded that Erdoğan left Washington with little to show after a 23-minute private meeting, press conference, and 90-minute luncheon with Trump.³⁵ The episode was chalked up to a “photo-op” for Erdoğan to gain legitimacy in the West, and the press conference was largely devoid of substance – having highlighted the historic US-Turkey relationship rather than focusing on the issues at hand. In the US press, the meeting itself was overshadowed by Turkish security forces' violent assault of protesters outside the Turkish Embassy.³⁶ The US House Foreign Affairs Committee later went so far

³⁵ Pinar Tremblay, “Why Erdogan's US Visit Will Only Create More Problems for Turkey,” *Al Monitor*, 19 May 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-united-states-trump-erdogan-meeting-problem.html>; Metin Gurcan, “Did Erdogan Leave Trump Meeting Empty-Handed?” *Al Monitor*, 19 May 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-united-states-trump-erdogan-summit.html>

³⁶ The Washington Post Editorial Board, “First, Erdogan's Goons Attack Protesters. Then, the Embassy Blames the Victims.” *The Washington Post*, 19 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/first-erdogans-goons-attack-protesters-then-the-embassy-blames-the-victims/2017/05/19/be3eacbe-3c04-11e7-9e48-c4f199710b69_story.html?utm_term=.8eb898799c0c

as to officially condemn the episode,³⁷ and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan called on the Turkish government to apologize for the incident.³⁸ As the meeting followed the Pentagon's May 9th announcement that the US would directly arm the YPG, the lack of concrete policy or statements emerging from the two leaders' press conference was unsurprising. The meeting was clearly designed to save face between the two allies, not to develop permanent solutions to the tensions underlying US-Turkey relations.

Although President Trump has shown small signs of "support" – or, more aptly, "consideration" – for Turkey and the US-Turkey alliance, it can hardly be said that Trump has indicated, either publicly or privately, that behind "America first!" it is "Turkey second!" It should be reminded that the US-Turkey relationship is key, but it is not *the* key to broader US foreign policy in the era of Trump.

³⁷ US House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Violence Outside the Turkish Ambassador's Residence: The Right to Peaceful Protest," Subcommittee Hearing, 25 May 2017, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-violence-outside-turkish-ambassadors-residence-right-peaceful-protest/>

³⁸ US Speaker of the House, "Press Release: Statement on Committee Passage of Turkey Resolution," Speaker Paul Ryan Press Office, 25 May 2017, <http://www.speaker.gov/press-release/statement-committee-passage-turkey-resolution>