

Erdogan's White House visit papers over US-Turkish tensions

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Following White House meetings Tuesday, US President Donald Trump and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan both vowed that relations between the two countries would be placed on new foundations, cemented through the strengthening of cooperation in “fighting terrorism.”

The invocation of unity, however, could not mask the tensions arising from the fact that Washington is arming and fighting alongside a Syrian Kurdish militia, the YPG, which Ankara regards as a “terrorist organization.”

On the eve of his trip to Washington, Erdogan vowed that he would seek to convince Trump to reverse his decision last week to authorize the shipment of small arms, ammunition, machine guns, armored vehicles and engineering equipment to the YPG, with which several hundred US special operations troops have been embedded as “trainers” and “advisers.”

Speaking in Ankara Tuesday, just ahead of the White House meeting, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim warned that Turkey was prepared to renew cross-border attacks against the YPG if Erdogan failed to win Trump over.

“If necessary assurances are not given, what we’ll do is very clear. We are determined and we will do what’s necessary in order to clean terror, whether it is within our borders or outside our borders,” Yildirim told the parliamentary group of Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Late last month, Turkish warplanes carried out airstrikes against YPG positions in northern Syria, killing at least 20 Kurdish fighters. The attack was followed by cross-border artillery barrages. The attacks prompted heated protests from Washington and the deployment of US Army personnel in Stryker combat vehicles along the Turkish border to serve as a buffer

between the Turkish military and the Kurdish militia.

The Pentagon has insisted that the YPG, which is the military arm of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), is the only force capable of serving as a proxy ground force in the US campaign against ISIS in Syria, which has been waged with intensive US airstrikes that have killed large numbers of civilians. The weapons shipments are designed to prepare an imminent offensive against the city of Raqqa, proclaimed by the Islamist militia as its Syrian capital.

Ankara regards the YPG as a branch of the outlawed PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), which has carried out armed actions in Turkey in support of Kurdish autonomy. Both Turkey and the US have labeled the PKK as a “terrorist organization,” and in his remarks Tuesday, Trump vowed that Washington would stand with Turkey against “terrorist groups like ISIS and the PKK.”

Turkey has warned that US arms funneled to the YPG will end up in the hands of the PKK. Its real concern, however, is that the Syrian Kurds will succeed in carving out an autonomous zone on Turkey’s southern border, thereby strengthening Kurdish resistance within Turkey itself.

In what was billed as a press conference after his initial talks with Trump, Erdogan insisted in his remarks that “It is absolutely unacceptable to take the YPG-PYD into consideration as partners in the region, and it’s going against a global agreement we reached.”

Erdogan also indicated that he had reiterated his demand that Washington extradite the US-based pro-American Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen, who the Turkish government has accused of masterminding the failed military coup of July 15, 2016. The US government has shown no sign of handing over Gulen, who is widely believed to be a CIA “asset.”

For his part, Trump delivered remarks in which he mispronounced the Turkish president's name and praised Turkey as a military ally in the Korean War. "Turkish courage in war is legendary; that is so true," he said. He made no mention of the tensions over the Kurdish question, affirming only that the US and Turkey agreed on the need to "reduce the violence in Syria and create the conditions for a peaceful resolution." In fact, both Washington and Ankara are principally responsible for fomenting the more than six-year-old war for regime change that has killed hundreds of thousands and laid waste to Syrian society.

While normally such appearances are followed by two questions each from the White House press corps and the media from the country of the visiting head of state, Trump cut the event short, first indicating that there would be no questions and then briefly responding to the shouted demands of reporters for a response to the claims that he revealed classified information in a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week. "We had a very, very successful meeting," Trump said of his encounter with Lavrov, insisting that its aim was to "get as many to fight terrorism as possible." He then ducked out a side door with Erdogan, who was probably also not anxious to take any questions.

When Erdogan visited Washington in March of 2016, Obama failed to invite him to the White House, in what was meant as a gesture of disapproval over the Turkish government's human rights record. The Trump administration has explicitly jettisoned the use of such pretenses as a means of advancing US imperialist interests. The shift in policy was spelled out earlier this month in a speech by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former ExxonMobil CEO, who told State Department employees that pushing the human rights agenda "creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests."

Trump called to congratulate Erdogan for winning a referendum last month that grants him quasi-dictatorial powers to intensify his regime's crackdown on political opposition and the media. He has publicly praised the Turkish head of state, clearly wishing to replicate his thuggish methods of rule in the US itself.

Despite Ankara's hopes that these gestures indicated a fundamental shift in US policy, Washington's battle to assert its hegemony over the Middle East continues

to cut across Turkey's own interests as a regional power.

In an attempt to assuage Turkish protests over the arming of the YPG, the Pentagon is providing additional resources for a so-called intelligence fusion center run by the CIA and military intelligence in Ankara for the purpose of helping the Turkish regime hunt down and kill Kurdish militants of the PKK both inside Turkey and across the border in Iraq.

While Erdogan undoubtedly failed in his bid to reverse the US decision to arm the YPG, it is likely that he pressed for reassurance from Washington that its support for the Syrian Kurdish militia was only a tactical expediency and not a move by US imperialism to carve out a new Kurdish mini-state on Turkey's border. He may also have sought a commitment that once the YPG has served its purpose in battling ISIS, the same Pentagon resources being provided against the PKK can be turned against the Syrian Kurds as well.



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