

US, Turkey suspend visa services in diplomatic row

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On October 8, both the USA and Turkey mutually suspended all non-migrant visa services, amid an accelerating deterioration in relations between the two NATO allies and the Trump administration's escalating war threats against North Korea and Iran.

In a statement issued on Twitter, the US Embassy in Ankara announced the suspension of all non-immigrant visa services at its diplomatic facilities in Turkey: "Recent events have forced the United States Government to reassess the commitment of the Government of Turkey to the security of US Mission facilities and personnel. In order to minimize the number of visitors to our Embassy and Consulates while this assessment proceeds, effective immediately we have suspended all non-immigrant visa services at all US diplomatic facilities in Turkey."

Immediately afterwards, the Turkish Embassy in Washington responded in kind, declaring that it had "suspended all non-immigrant visa services at all Turkish diplomatic facilities in the US."

This came after the chief prosecutor in Istanbul issued a detention warrant for a local employee of the US Consulate. The employee has reportedly not yet been apprehended.

On September 25, Metin Topuz, another locally-employed staff member of the US Consulate General in Istanbul, was arrested for spying and attempting to overthrow the government, i.e. his links with the FETO (Fethullahist Terrorist Organization). Named after Fethullah Gulen, a pro-American Turkish Islamic cleric living in Pennsylvania in a self-imposed exile, who leads an international work of schools, firms and foundations backed by the CIA, the FETO has been accused by the Turkish government of masterminding the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.

In a statement issued Thursday, the US Embassy said

that it was "deeply disturbed" at the arrest of Topuz, adding, "We believe these allegations to be wholly without merit." The Turkish foreign ministry replied that Topuz was neither a staff member of the American Consulate nor entitled to diplomatic or consular immunity.

In addition to these two employees, a dozen Americans, including another consulate staff and an American pastor, Andrew Brunson, are behind bars and facing long prison sentences on charges of having played a part in the failed, US-backed coup attempt of last year.

At a meeting with reporters in Istanbul on October 6, the US Ambassador to Turkey John Bass said: "I am deeply disturbed that some people in the Turkish government prefer to try this case through media outlets rather than properly pursuing the case in a court of law before a judge. That does not strike me as pursuing justice, it seems to me more a pursuit of vengeance."

Ankara intends to use the detainees as bargaining chips with Washington. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Turkish Police Academy, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that his government would hand over Brunson to the USA in exchange for Fethullah Gulen. "You have another pastor in your hands. Give him to us and... we will give him to you," he said.

Lying behind the crisis in US-Turkish relations are deepening strategic conflicts between the two countries as Ankara improves ties with Russia and Iran, two of the main targets of US war planning.

Over the weekend, the Turkish army launched its latest military operation in Syria's Idlib province, reportedly in close cooperation with Russian forces. In Idlib, the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army militia is

fighting the jihadist Tahrir al-Sham—a group spearheaded by the former Al Nusra Front, the Syrian wing of Al Qaeda.

The Turkish army is mounting its operation under an agreement reached in Astana, Kazakhstan last month and backed by Russia and Iran, which support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. On September 14, Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the Syrian government and opposition groups, came together to implement a cease-fire in so-called de-escalation zones in Syria. According to the agreement, Turkish troops will be stationed in Idlib, while Russia and Iran will hold the surrounding territory to suspend attacks.

In justifying the Turkish invasion in Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said Saturday that “bombs would fall on our cities, if we didn’t take measures,” adding, “When we don’t go to Syria, Syria comes to us.”

Turkey’s main concern, however, is the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia, the main proxy force of the US imperialism and its European partners in Syria. Ankara regards the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a three-decades-long guerrilla war inside Turkey.

“We will never allow a terror corridor that begins in Afrin and goes to the Mediterranean,” Erdoğan said, referring to the Syrian side of Turkey’s southern border controlled by US-backed Kurdish forces.

Turkey was initially one of the major supporters of rebels fighting the Assad regime during the now six-and-a-half-year war. However, its focus has moved from ousting Assad to securing its own border against Kurdish groups, pitting Ankara in a conflict with its NATO imperialist allies.

While declaring its support for Ankara’s current military operation in Idlib to “ensure the de-escalation regime in the region,” the Pentagon is, in fact, deeply concerned about a possible conflict between Turkish troops and YPG fighters located around the city.

Moreover, Turkish military operation come amid media reports of the alleged preparation of a US-backed military offensive on Idlib. Speaking at a panel on July 30, Brett McGurk, the US special envoy for global coalition to counter the Islamic State, said, “Idlib has turned into a safe zone for al-Qaida terrorists on the Turkish border.” This was interpreted by Ankara,

Moscow and Tehran as the sign of an imminent US offensive in Syria.

Along with close cooperation in Idlib, Ankara and Tehran also took sides with the Iraqi central government against the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) independence referendum on September 25. They imposed sanctions against the KRG that could be followed by a possible military action to seize external border posts held by the KRG from the Iranian and Turkish side. Ankara is also prepared to send its troops to Kirkuk and other “disputed territories” occupied by the KRG during the fight against the Islamic State.

Meanwhile, Iran’s foreign ministry spokesman sharply responded to new US threats, including to designate Iran’s Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist group. According to Iran’s Tasnim news agency, Bahram Qasemi described such a move as a “strategic mistake,” adding: “Iran’s reaction would be firm, decisive and crushing.”



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