

Erdo?an-Trump meeting resolves none of US-Turkish conflicts

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an concluded a White House meeting with Donald Trump Wednesday with no indication the two heads of state had resolved any of the thorny issues that have led to increasingly tense US-Turkish relations over the past several years.

Trump, whose political focus was obviously on televised impeachment hearings being held that day in Congress, declared himself a “big fan” of the Turkish president and described their 65-minute discussion as “wonderful.”

The intense controversy within the American ruling establishment over ties between Washington and Ankara and their relation to US policy in Syria and the broader Middle East was underscored by Trump’s decision to invite a group of five Republican senators to join the talks. They included Lindsey Graham, a key Senate ally of the Trump White House, who sharply condemned Turkey’s attack on the Syrian Kurdish militias that formed the backbone of the Pentagon’s proxy ground forces in Syria.

The Turkish daily *Hürriyet* described Erdo?an’s meeting with the senators as a “class” in which the Turkish president insisted that his military was fighting “terrorists” in Syria and not the country’s Kurds. Reportedly, at one point he pulled out an iPad and played what some in the meeting described as a crude Turkish propaganda video. It demonized the leader of the Syrian Kurdish militia, Mazloun Kobani, for his alleged responsibility for terrorist attacks carried out when he was a member of the Turkish Kurdish separatist movement, the PKK, or Kurdistan Workers Party, against which Ankara has fought a bloody counterinsurgency in southeast Turkey for the past 35 years.

The apparent purpose of the unusual inclusion of US legislators in such a White House meeting with a

visiting head of state was to impress upon Erdo?an that—Trump’s praise for the Turkish president notwithstanding—the US Congress was prepared to pass binding sanctions legislation against Turkey, particularly over its acquiring of Russia’s S-400 advanced air-defense system, and that there is substantial support for sanctions over Turkish actions in Syria. Turkey has already been excluded from acquiring F-35 “stealth” fighter jets on the grounds that its use of the S-400s could compromise their security.

Trump unleashed a political firestorm in Washington last month after delivering what amounted to a green light for a Turkish incursion into Syria in a phone call with Erdo?an in which he announced he would withdraw US special operations troops from the Turkish-Syrian border region. His subsequent vow to pull all US troops out of Syria triggered intense opposition from both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill, as well as a near-mutinous reaction within the US military command.

While much of this opposition was voiced in the form of moral outrage over the “betrayal of the Kurds,” its driving force was the concern that Trump’s policy represented an end to the nine-year-long US regime-change operation in Syria, a surrender to Russian and Iranian influence there and a retreat from the decades-old military campaign to assert US imperialist hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Trump subsequently reversed his demagogic vow to pull all US troops out of Syria and end Washington’s “endless wars.” Speaking with reporters during his appearance with Erdo?an, Trump reiterated his crude justification for the continued US military presence: the seizing of Syria’s oil.

“We’re keeping the oil, we have the oil, the oil is secure, we left troops behind only for the oil,” Trump

said.

While US armored units have indeed taken up positions in the oil fields of Syria's northeastern Deir Ezzor province, senior US commanders and Pentagon officials have distanced themselves from Trump's "take the oil" message.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley, appearing on the ABC news program "This Week" on Sunday, said that "maybe 600" US troops are staying in Syria. Making no mention of oil, he claimed that they were there to prevent the "reemergence of ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]" and that "the objective will remain the same, the enduring defeat of ISIS."

Last week, a Pentagon spokesperson insisted that "securing of the oil fields is subordinate" to the "mission" of defeating ISIS. The pretense is that by occupying the oil fields, the US military is preventing ISIS, which is already decimated, from laying hold of their resources while ensuring the Pentagon's erstwhile Kurdish allies a revenue stream. At the same time, the Pentagon has acknowledged that the US military will employ "overwhelming force" to prevent troops loyal to the Syrian government and Russian forces supporting them from laying claim to the oil.

Behind all the rhetoric about supporting the Kurds and fighting ISIS, the strategic aim is to deny the oil to the Assad government in order to prevent its reconstruction of Syria, which has suffered the death of half a million people, the displacement of half the population and the destruction of its infrastructure as a result of the nine-year-old US-orchestrated war for regime-change.

Erdo?an is pursuing the interests of the Turkish ruling class in Syria, utilizing the same Islamist Al Qaeda-linked militias that the CIA armed and funded against Assad. They have been unleashed against Syria's Kurdish population, committing war crimes with the aim of ethnically cleansing a "safe zone" in the Syrian-Turkish border region, where Erdo?an has proposed to relocate millions of Syrian refugees now in Turkey.

Clashes are continuing in the border area, despite successive cease-fires negotiated with Washington and Moscow, as the Turkish-backed militias attack both the Kurdish militias and Syrian government troops.

The pliant Turkish press largely treated Erdo?an's trip to Washington as a success. While he achieved nothing of substance, he was able to avoid any serious

US condemnation and to adopt a nationalistic posture.

The Turkish president revealed to the media that he had handed back to Trump a letter in which the US president warned him not to be a "fool" or act like a "tough guy" in Syria. Erdo?an's objection was that the letter was shared with the leader of the Syrian YPG militia, regarded by Ankara as "terrorist." He also pushed back against a resolution passed by the US House of Representatives declaring the more than century-old massacre of 1.5 million Armenians as a genocide, an action the House had previously rejected out of deference to Turkey.

Among the issues that were not raised—at least publicly—was Turkey's defiance of US sanctions against Iran and, in particular, the criminal proceedings brought in the US against Turkey's state-run Halkbank for helping Iran evade the sanctions.

Geopolitical tensions between Washington and Ankara have been exacerbated by the US war drive against Iran, upon which Turkey depends as a major provider of energy.



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