



Major Developments in U.S.-Turkey Relations Following the July 15 Coup Attempt

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The July 15 Coup Attempt

Beginning in the evening of July 15, a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to oust Turkey's government. While the coup attempt was defeated the following day, more than 200 people had been killed. The Turkish government said it had evidence that the coup attempt was organized by Fethullah Gulen and his followers (labelled the Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization, or FETO). [1] Gulen has lived in the U.S. since 1999.

The U.S.'s Initial Response

Secretary of State John Kerry's first reaction to the coup attempt called for "stability and peace and continuity within Turkey." [2] A few hours later, the White House released a statement saying that "all parties in Turkey should support the democratically-elected government of Turkey, show restraint, and avoid any violence or bloodshed." [3] Two days later, Kerry warned the Turkish government not to overreach in its reprisals against coup plotters, saying that NATO "has a requirement with respect to democracy" and that it would "measure very carefully what is happening." [4] On July 19 – four days after the attempted coup – U.S. President Barack Obama personally called Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to offer his support. [5]

On August 1, Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was the first high-level official from abroad to visit Turkey since the coup attempt. [6] Three weeks later, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Ankara to express solidarity with the U.S.'s NATO ally. Biden was given a tour of Turkey's parliament, which was bombed during the coup attempt.

In Turkey, Kerry's initial statement on July 15 was perceived as not going far enough to condemn the coup attempt and in some cases as evidence that the U.S. was withholding a stronger response in case the coup attempt had succeeded. [7] Overall, the U.S. government's response was judged as somewhat confused and not cognizant enough of the seriousness of the nature of the attempted coup. [8] While the U.S. dispatched high-level officials to Turkey in a show of solidarity, the quick focus from Washington on the actions by the Turkish government against the coup plotters, and Ankara's view that Washington was not responding appropriately to the seriousness of the coup attempt, set a tone of tension and distrust between the U.S. and Turkey from which both countries have yet to recover.

The Gulen Issue

By July 19, Turkey announced it had already begun sending evidence to the U.S. showing Gulen's involvement in crimes in Turkey. [9] On August 23, the U.S. State Department announced that Turkey had formally requested the extradition of Gulen. [10]

As of July 2017, the judicial review of Turkey's extradition case is ongoing. Since the coup attempt, the Turkish government has kept up pressure on American officials concerning the request. Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag [11] and Foreign Minister

Mevlut Cavusoglu [12] have both met with Attorney General Jeff Sessions to discuss the matter, and the request is frequently brought up during high-level sit downs between officials of the two countries.

In Turkey, there is the perception that the U.S. government has not sufficiently prioritized the case, while U.S. officials remind their Turkish counterparts that the judicial review takes time and must be carried out according to due process. In August 2016, Bozdag argued that the U.S. is at least required to arrest Gulen under Article 9 of a 1979 extradition treaty between the U.S. and Turkey. [13]

U.S.-Turkey Relations Under the Trump Administration

Donald Trump's electoral victory in November 2016 was greeted with cautious optimism in Turkey. [14] On February 7, President Trump and President Erdogan spoke by phone for the first time, initiating a flood of high-level engagement between the two governments. [15]

However, the relationship between the NATO allies has faced a number of complicating issues beyond the U.S.'s initial response to the July 15 coup attempt and the continued review of the extradition case against Gulen.

On October 7 of last year, American pastor Andrew Brunson was arrested by Turkish authorities for alleged links to FETO. [16] He remains incarcerated today despite protests by members of Congress [17] and President Trump himself. [18] In March 2017, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim acknowledged the need to speed up the pastor's trial, but there has not yet been any indication from the Turkish government that he will be released. [19]

Though not directly related to the July 15 coup attempt, a May 2017 decision by the Trump administration to go ahead with a plan to arm the People's Protection Units (YPG) – which is the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and is the dominant actor in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – has further strained U.S.-Turkey relations. The Turkish government views the YPG as a terrorist organization due to its links to the PKK, and there are fears in Ankara that Washington's legitimization of the YPG through provision of arms will embolden the PKK in its attacks against Turkish civilians, government officials, and military personnel. [20]

In the first meeting between President Trump and President Erdogan in May 2017, these two issues – the imprisonment of Pastor Brunson and the U.S.'s arming of the YPG – were at the top of the agenda. [21] Neither President Trump nor President Erdogan walked away with satisfactory commitments on these issues, but the leaders both emphasized the importance of the relationship and endeavored to set a positive tone. [22]

However, a violent incident in Washington between President Erdogan's bodyguards and local protestors, who were reportedly carrying the PYD flag, following the meeting between the two leaders overshadowed their conversation. [23] The State Department summoned the Turkish ambassador regarding the violence. [24] The House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for charges against those involved in the brawl. [25] The D.C. Police Department announced in June that it is pursuing arrests in the case, including of security officials who were part of the Turkish delegation. [26]

The Turkish government has pushed back against these actions by U.S. government and the D.C. police department, saying that U.S. security officials did not provide the appropriate level of security to prevent altercations between protestors and ensure the safety of President Erdogan and his delegation. [27] The U.S. Ambassador to Turkey was summoned by the Turkish Foreign Ministry regarding the incident. [28]

U.S.-Turkey Relations One Year After the July 15 Coup Attempt

Tensions in the U.S.-Turkey relationship predated the July 15 coup attempt, but last summer's tragedy further strained the ties between the two countries. A year after the coup attempt, the extradition case against Gulen is pending, while the U.S.'s decision to arm the YPG despite Turkey's warnings has only deepened suspicions in Ankara that Washington does not take the security of its NATO ally seriously enough.

As such, a year after the July 15 coup attempt, the U.S. and Turkey have not yet been able to recover from the souring of their relationship. However, a flurry of high-level engagement between the countries since July 15, 2016 indicates a deep commitment from both Washington and Ankara to overcoming current challenges and stresses.

In his remarks to the staff of the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul on July 10, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed his hope that the “extraordinarily important” relationship between the U.S. and Turkey can and will improve.

“I’ve had now about six hours of meetings over three different occasions with President Erdogan, and I think each meeting things are getting a little better, in terms of the tone between us,” Tillerson said. “I think we are beginning to rebuild some of that trust that we lost in one another.” [29]

Spotlight on High-Level Engagement Between American and Turkish Officials

Since the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, the tense relationship between the U.S. and Turkey has suffered additional stress. However, disagreements between the two countries on issues like the extradition case against Fethullah Gulen and Washington’s arming of the YPG have not prevented high-level officials in the U.S. and Turkey from regularly engaging with each other.

Between July 15, 2016 and July 11, 2017, there were no fewer than:

- 14 visits by high-level American officials to Turkey;
- 9 visits by high-level Turkish officials to the U.S.;
- 10 meetings between high-level American and Turkish officials in third-country locations;
- and 28 phone conversations between high-level American and Turkish officials.

Following the coup attempt, President Obama and President Erdogan met once (at the 2016 G20 Summit) and talked over the four phone times. President Trump and President Erdogan have so far met twice (once in D.C. and once at the 2017 G20 Summit) and have had three phone conversations.

Since the start of the Trump administration in January 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Joint Chiefs Chairman Joseph Dunford, anti-ISIS envoy Brett McGurk, FBI Director Mike Pompeo, and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley have all visited Turkey.

Since July 15, 2016, President Erdogan has visited the U.S. twice. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Defense Minister Fikri Isik, Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog, Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci, Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar, National Intelligence Organization head Hakan Fidan, and Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Mehmet Simsek have all also visited the U.S.

* Includes visits in which multiple Turkish officials traveled to the U.S. as part of the same delegation.

NOTE: This information was compiled by THO researchers from information available from the following sources: the White House, the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Justice, Hurriyet Daily News, Daily Sabah, Anadolu Agency, the Washington Post, Reuters, and Bloomberg.

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