



“Difficult Choices”: Prospects for U.S.-Turkey Relations in 2017

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Since Donald Trump’s election as U.S. president in November of last year, American and Turkish officials have been cautiously optimistic concerning relations between their two countries. Following Trump’s inauguration in late January 2017, high-level officials from both administrations have moved swiftly to solidify relationships.

February 7 – President Trump and President Erdogan speak for the first time since the former’s inauguration, via telephone. [1]

February 19 – U.S. Vice President Mike Pence meets with Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim; the two discuss improving ties between the two countries and possible areas for enhanced cooperation on security issues. [2]

March 7 – Top American, Russian, and Turkish generals meet in Antalya to discuss the military situation in northern Syria amid tensions between rival Syrian militias and rebel factions gathered around Manbij. [3]

March 21-22 – Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu visits Washington, D.C. to attend the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition on the Defeat of ISIS. Cavusoglu also holds high-level meetings with American officials, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions and National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster. [4]

March 30 – U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visits Ankara to meet with President Erdogan and Foreign Minister Cavusoglu. The leaders discuss a host of security issues concerning ISIS and the YPG, as well as U.S. policy concerning Fethullah Gulen, the self-exiled, U.S.-based cleric Ankara believes fomented the July coup attempt against the Turkish government. [5]

While high-level meetings and discussions between the countries’ top officials and leaders represent a positive first step in improved U.S.-Turkey relations, a handful of unresolved and thorny disagreements could yet derail these attempts.

First, Ankara has officially requested that the U.S. government extradite Fethullah Gulen and has presented evidence of the crimes for which he is accused to Washington as part of that process. Ankara believes that Washington is not moving fast enough on the issue, while Washington has emphasized that the judicial process takes time and must be followed to the letter of the law.

Second, American and Turkish priorities in the fight against ISIS are hardly aligned. The new administration has indicated that the defeat of ISIS is its top priority in the region. [6] Turkey and the U.S. have cooperated in this fight; Turkey allows the Global Coalition to conduct air operations against the terrorist group from Incirlik Air Base, and the U.S. provided Turkey with air support and military advisors during its recently concluded Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria. However, the U.S. and Turkey fundamentally disagree on the role of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), in the fight against ISIS in Syria, specifically with regard to the upcoming assault on Raqqa. [7] Turkey views the PYD/YPG as an off-shoot of the PKK – a terrorist organization – while the U.S. maintains that the PYD/YPG and the PKK are not linked and that the former is the most effective armed group in the fight against ISIS.

Finally, Trump’s “America First” agenda could spell trouble for Turkish-American trade, although this remains less discussed in the face of pressing security concerns. The Trump administration’s ban preventing passengers on Turkish

Airlines flights from Istanbul to the U.S. from storing electronic devices larger than smartphones in their carry-on baggage has already caused Turkish Airlines' stock to drop. [8]

Yet the desire for an improvement in relations seems in earnest on the part of both governments, and even these complex issues may yet be resolved. There are several ways in which the two countries could yet find a way forward for cooperation on additional humanitarian, security, and economic issues.

Humanitarian Aid

In his March speech to the Global Coalition against ISIS, Secretary Tillerson proposed the establishment of "interim zones of stability" in Syria. [9] These zones are to be set up where military operations against ISIS have ceased, and they are to be the targets of a basic infrastructure rebuild. Ultimately, their goal is to allow for the swift repatriation of Syrian refugees to their erstwhile homes.

While many political and security concerns must be hashed out before these zones can be established – for example, it is unclear who will be responsible for protection of the zones – Turkey will surely play a crucial role in this endeavor. As part of the stabilization plan, Secretary Tillerson specified that liberated areas that have seen inter-rebel fighting would first require firm ceasefire agreements. Recently, Turkey has been working closely with Russia and Iran to develop and maintain ceasefires in Syria. In December, Turkey played an outsize role in negotiating a humanitarian ceasefire to allow for the evacuation of Aleppo. [10] Since then, Turkey has been a key member of the Astana process aimed at maintaining a Syria-wide ceasefire and enabling an environment conducive to the resolution of the Syrian conflict. [11]

These ceasefires have not been perfect and have been marred by violations. Nevertheless, the negotiations between Turkey, Russia, and Iran have brought Syria within sight of a real political resolution to the conflict. UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura's recent call for the three countries to work together in renewing a Syria-wide ceasefire highlights the importance these three states have acquired in the global effort to end violence in Syria. [12]

Security

While tensions between the U.S. and Turkey regarding disagreements over the PYD/YPG are serious and need to be resolved before U.S.-Turkey relations can improve substantially, they should not obscure the various other ways in which the U.S. and Turkey have cooperated – and continue to cooperate – in relation to the fight against ISIS.

Stopping the flow of ISIS fighters across Syria's borders remains a top priority as the Global Coalition works to defeat the terrorist organization. Turkey has stepped up its border security in recent months, and Operation Euphrates Shield has now cleared more than 700 sq. mi. in northern Syria of ISIS elements, eliminating their access to the Turkish border entirely. Cooperation with coalition countries, including in the form of information sharing, has now rendered the Turkish border "completely inaccessible to ISIS fighters," according to Brett McGurk, the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS. [13]

The Trump administration's geopolitical outlook also offers a welcome change for Turkey, as it shares many of Ankara's views concerning the region's powerbrokers. Trump has made it clear he is no fan of Iran, a perspective that will likely bolster morale in Ankara. Despite significant economic ties between Turkey and Iran as well as their occasional cooperation in Syria, Tehran's recent prominence and bellicosity in the region has alarmed the Turkish government. [14]

President Trump's administration has also shown a desire to seek a rapprochement with Russia. Given President Erdogan's own reconciliation with President Putin over the past year, this could make Turkey's diplomatic balancing act (in the face of NATO/U.S.-Russia tensions) a less challenging affair.

Finally, President Erdogan's frictions with NATO – a byproduct of his increasingly contentious relationship with Europe and his improving relationship with President Putin – are less likely to upset an American president who consistently airs his own reservations about the alliance. [15]

Economy

Turkey's prospective economic relations with the U.S. offer fewer complications than security cooperation. While recent domestic troubles relating to political instability and internal security have weakened Turkey's economy [16], and though the electronics ban has ruffled feathers in Turkey [17], incentives for bilateral cooperation abound. The ties between the two countries are profound; as of late August 2016, approximately 1,600 U.S. companies maintained investments in or were doing business with Turkey. U.S. companies use Turkey as an export base and a regional hub, often from offices in Istanbul. [18] Recent high-profile deals – like a March agreement between G.E. and three Turkish companies to build the nation's largest wind power complex – suggest the American-Turkish economic partnership is still robust and has plenty of room to grow. [19]

While there has been little specificity from the Trump camp concerning its economic expectations vis-à-vis Turkey, there is reason to be optimistic. Despite Trump's avowed protectionist goals on the campaign trail, he is a businessman, he is committed to economic deregulation, and he has appointed a host of corporate, globalist figures to his cabinet. He remains tied to the larger Republican apparatus, which – historically – has been a staunch proponent of free-trade policies. At a joint press conference with FM Cavusoglu on March 30, Secretary Tillerson reiterated American commitment to these values in the Turkish-American context, calling for deeper economic ties and praising existing cooperation such as the U.S.-Turkey Science and Technology Agreement. [20]

Despite recent speed bumps, Turkey's rise as a regional economic powerhouse will continue; according to a recent PricewaterhouseCoopers report, Turkey will have the world's 12th most powerful economy by 2030. [21] However, the extent to which Turkey's economy can recover from setbacks is tied directly to its handling of security threats – particularly those emanating from the Syria conflict. Turkey's tourism industry suffered in 2015 and 2016 largely due to these security concerns. Greater U.S.-Turkey security cooperation on Syria is essential for boosting U.S.-Turkey economic cooperation and success.

For the U.S. and Turkey, these interconnected issues form a multifaceted foundation for relations that have historically seen periods of both growth and strain. A new presidential administration in the U.S. has provided an opening for improvement after a period of marked tension in the relationship. It is true that crucial issues like the extradition of Fethullah Gulen and U.S. support of the PYD/YPG cannot be left unresolved; as Secretary Tillerson said in his remarks in Ankara, the U.S. and Turkey face "difficult choices" ahead. [22] Yet the two countries can also work to pursue greater cooperation in areas outside these issues in order to maintain a solid foundation upon which a stronger era in U.S.-Turkey relations can be built.

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