

# Why Erdogan Wants to Get Along with Trump

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## The Turkish leader knows that if he cannot restore economic growth at home or stay just out of Russia's permanent orbit, his political troubles will only increase.

**T**urkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has visited Washington nearly a dozen times as prime minister of Turkey between 2003 and 2014 and president since. I have witnessed all of these visits, observing the red-carpet treatment granted to him at various think tanks and at public meetings across downtown Washington.

His brief visit yesterday, though, was different from others: This time Erdogan was unwelcome in the U.S. capital for a number of reasons, ranging from anger over Ankara's recent incursion into northern Syria to backlash against his democratic transgressions at home. Accordingly, he avoided public events (except for meeting a handful of supporters at a Turkish government-built mosque in the Maryland suburbs of Washington D.C.), and stayed less than a full day in the U.S. capital. So why did he visit Washington and meet with Trump?

Erdogan faces many domestic and foreign policy challenges, ranging from the growing burden of nearly 4 million Syrian refugees at home to the conflict in Syria next door. Yet his biggest challenge is economic growth, concerning Turkey's 82 million citizens.

Erdogan has won over a dozen nationwide elections in Turkey since 2002 mainly on a platform of economic growth. In 2018, however, the Turkish economy fell into recession, which is the key reason Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost Turkey's largest city, Istanbul, as well as all but one of the country's other five largest cities to his opposition in local elections earlier this year. Erdogan knows that if he cannot bring back economic growth to Turkey, he is in big trouble.

This is why he chose to come to Washington, notwithstanding the anti-Turkish mood that prevails in the U.S. capital. Erdogan is aware that the path to Turkey's economic recovery, his political survival, and Ankara's security goes through improved ties with the U.S.

As a general rule, international capital avoids Turkey when U.S.-Turkish ties appear to be in permanent crisis, and Turkey's economy typically performs well when markets believe that U.S.-Turkish ties are in good shape. Erdogan came to Washington to fight the first perception, and boost the second. His only meeting in Washington other than seeing Trump at the White House: a closed-door late-night session with the CEOs of major U.S. businesses that Erdogan courted.

During his visit, Erdogan also aimed to end—along with Trump—the brewing crisis between Turkey and the U.S. over Ankara's recent purchase of a Russian-made S-400 missile defense system. The U.S. Congress has already enacted tough sanctions targeting Turkey's economy and defense industry because of this purchase, and lawmakers have proposed additional and harsher sanctions that would spell the end of U.S.-Turkish military cooperation. In other words, if fully implemented, these sanctions will destroy Turkey's economy and rupture ties between Ankara and Washington.

Erdogan is aware of the broader strategic implications of such a development. A break-up with Washington would leave Ankara **woefully exposed** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/erdogan-in-washington-setting-the-agenda-for-a-pivotal-visit>) to its historic enemy, Russia, a power that has been bullying the Turks since the eighteenth century.

Erdogan and Putin share an affinity for each other as strongmen presidents, and the failed 2016 coup in Turkey gave Putin an opening to further court his counterpart. In the past, Ankara used to regard Russia as its historical nemesis and bully. Though these ingrained sentiments have hardly disappeared, the failed coup allowed Putin to play on Erdogan's domestic fears, Ankara's regional isolation, and Putin's habit of sowing discord within NATO, leading the Russian leader to re-calibrate his country's foreign policy towards Turkey. Since 2016, Russia has been playing the role of the nemesis-turned-ally for Turkey.

In recent times, Erdogan and Putin have worked to broker ad hoc deals in Syria. Unsurprisingly, such deals always come with strings attached. In less than six weeks after the failed coup attempt against Erdogan, in August 2016, Putin started to give Erdogan the green light for successive Turkish military incursions into Syria. These moves have helped Ankara undermine the Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG), an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terror-designated entity and Turkey's sworn enemy for many decades. Yet nothing comes free from Russia: in return for these Syria deals, Putin has sold Erdogan the S-400s, successfully planting seeds of discord within NATO.

Erdogan is too smart a politician not to see Putin's game. The Turkish leader is also aware that his country falling under Russia's orbit is akin to the fate of someone entering the Japanese mafia (yakuza)—the saying being: "Once you enter the yakuza, the only exit is through a coffin."

I would not be surprised, therefore, if Erdogan came to Washington offering to "settle" the S-400 issue with Trump. Journalists already reported that the Turkish president may have indeed suggested to his American counterpart that he block sanctions against Turkey in return for Ankara not "unpacking" the S-400s, i.e. not activating operational parts of the Russian system—a "temporary" permanent solution to Erdogan's and Turkey's Russia problem.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book **Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East** (<https://www.erdogansempire.com/>). This article originally appeared on the (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/opinion/2019/11/14/why-erdogan-wants-to-get-along-with-trump/>) Duvar English website (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/opinion/2019/11/14/why-erdogan-wants-to-get-along-with-trump/>).* ❖

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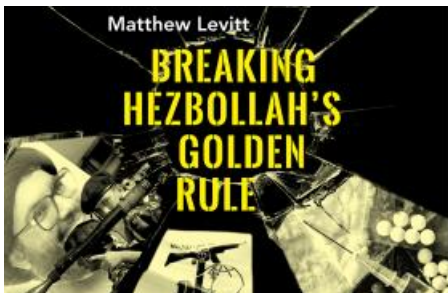
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