

Erdogan in Washington: Setting the Agenda for a Pivotal Visit

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#), [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#), [Conor Hiney \(/experts/conor-hiney\)](#), [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



[Conor Hiney \(/experts/conor-hiney\)](#)

Lt. Col. Conor Hiney (USAF) was a 2019-2020 military fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

Dana Stroul was the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow in The Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Brief Analysis

The Trump administration needs to treat the meeting as a chance to frankly address congressional concerns and defuse a host of hot-button issues, from Syria policy to F-35 production.

When President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Trump sit down for their planned face-to-face in Washington on November 13, their conversations will take place against a backdrop of increased U.S.-

Turkish tensions on foreign policy issues, along with concerns about a potential repeat of what happened last time he was in town. During Erdogan's May 2017 visit, his security detail was involved in a violent brawl with protestors in Sheridan Circle, an incident that significantly damaged Turkey's image in the United States. Given the current mood in Washington, he could face even larger protests this time around, risking a public diplomacy debacle. More important, Congress may soon issue sanctions targeting Ankara if he fails to mollify angry legislators. To minimize these risks, President Trump should use his strong rapport with Erdogan to iron out differences on the following issues.

TURKEY'S INCURSION INTO SYRIA

On October 9, Ankara sent troops into north Syria to undermine the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), an offshoot of the U.S.-designated Turkish terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Previously, the United States had partnered with the YPG and its eventual Kurdish-Arab coalition, the Syrian Democratic Forces, to battle the Islamic State since 2014.

As the main territories in the IS "caliphate" crumbled in 2017, U.S. officials began working with Ankara on a plan to create a "safe zone" in northeast Syria and relocate the YPG away from the Turkish border. Many in Washington are now angry at Erdogan for ordering an incursion that upsets those plans, which would have allowed the United States and Turkey to work together in the area without letting Russia and the Assad regime in. On October 28, the House of Representatives voted for legislation to punish Turkish military officials who have taken part in the incursion and block the sale of weapons their forces might use in Syria. The bill will now be taken up by the Senate for potential passage. Anger toward Turkey is rising within parts of the executive branch as well, with the Defense Department opposing the incursion.

Despite Ankara's move and Trump's simultaneous decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, the United States still has a deep interest in making sure that counterterrorism operations continue in the northeast, as well as addressing the root causes of IS and finding a political solution to end the war. The latter tasks entail working with Turkey to pressure the Assad regime, whose continued control over Syria will help IS recruit even more cadres as an underground insurgent group.

Now that the United States has satisfied Ankara's main demand—stepping aside for Turkish operations against the YPG—the Trump administration's priority in talks with Erdogan and other officials should be removing the most radical elements among Turkey's Syrian proxies, designing inclusive local governance structures in areas where Turkey operates, and protecting minority rights. The two governments should also coordinate their diplomatic actions regarding the UN-led constitutional committee process in Syria, since leaving Turkey to stand alone in support of the political opposition would give even greater leverage to the Assad regime and Russia.

One limitation is that President Trump is holding a significantly weaker hand with Ankara than even a month ago, a result of his abrupt withdrawal orders and the growing doubts about U.S. staying power. Nevertheless, he should make use of his remaining leverage and personal affinity with Erdogan, pressing him to take responsibility for two important tasks that can be carried out with U.S. and European support: namely, checking any major IS resurgence, and preventing the Assad regime and its allies from instrumentalizing the terrorist group's continued presence in Syria.

TURKEY'S ROLE IN F-35 PROGRAM

This year, Ankara continued with its purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems despite repeated U.S. warnings that the deal could compromise the security of American military systems in Turkey. In retaliation, the Pentagon took steps to kick Ankara out of the F-35 fighter jet program, sending U.S.-based Turkish military personnel home shortly after announcing the country's removal from the program on July 17. For now, Turkey is

still a major F-35 parts supplier, with eight of its companies manufacturing over 900 parts and remaining the sole provider for landing gear and missile interface unit sources. Yet these industrial relationships will end by March 2020 as acquisition chains shift to the United States.

Turkey has a limited window to threaten production by stopping exports, but that would only temporarily affect production, while likely destroying the country's chances of ever being readmitted into a program that it first joined as a founding member. If Ankara chooses that path, Washington would probably counter with sanctions affecting the current operations and readiness of multiple U.S.-made systems on which Turkey relies. This kind of punch/counterpunch would be extraordinarily damaging to the relationship's long-term health.

Whatever the case, combined congressional and Pentagon pressure will likely preclude Turkey's readmission into the F-35 program anytime soon, so Erdogan will look to Russia for alternative solutions. Moscow has reportedly offered multiple fourth- and fifth-generation fighter options to Ankara, any of which would deepen the NATO-Turkey wedge.

BROADER RUSSIAN ISSUES

Although President Vladimir Putin and other senior Russian officials have expressed reservations about Turkey's Syria incursion, the White House's withdrawal decisions have further entrenched Moscow's coveted reputation as a supposedly reliable mediator that can talk to all sides in the Middle East. As part of this broader geostrategic game, Russia has been gradually drawing Ankara into its sphere of influence in recent years.

Erdogan and Putin share an affinity for each other as strongman presidents, and the failed 2016 coup in Turkey gave Putin an opening to court his counterpart more deeply. Previously, Ankara viewed Russia as its historical nemesis and a regional bully. Although these ingrained sentiments have hardly disappeared, the failed coup allowed Moscow to play on Erdogan's domestic fears, Ankara's regional isolation, and Putin's habit of sowing discord within NATO, leading the two governments to steadily deepen their cooperation. For instance, with all eyes on Turkey's cross-border incursion, few noticed Moscow and Ankara's recent agreement to begin trading in their national currencies. Russia is also building Turkey's first nuclear power plant.

The relationship is not an equal one, however. Putin has far more leverage over Erdogan than the other way around, from longstanding ties with the PKK, to an economic relationship skewed in Moscow's favor (Turkey greatly relies on Russian natural gas and the influx of Russian tourists), to growing Russian information operations inside Turkey via outlets such as Sputnik.

Even so, Putin's recent moves carry some risks and challenges. For one, Russian military police have been patrolling the north Syrian town of Manbij abutting areas now controlled by Turkish-backed forces, raising the risk of accidental clashes between them. Meanwhile, a May poll found that 55 percent of the Russian public wants to end their country's Syrian involvement altogether. Yet the intervention does not appear to be a high-priority issue for them at present, so Putin likely has significant domestic leeway to continue interfering in Syria.

U.S. CONGRESSIONAL AGENDA

U.S. legislators were notably unified in their opposition to the administration's troop withdrawals from northeast Syria and perceived acquiescence to Turkish military operations against the Syrian Kurds. In their view, these operations have harmed civilians, forcibly changed demographics to push Kurds out, and enabled conditions for violent extremists to thrive.

On October 16, highlighting the bipartisan nature of this sentiment, the House voted overwhelmingly (354 to 60) to pass a resolution calling on Turkey to "act with restraint" in Syria. The resolution also condemned recent developments as giving new life to IS while emboldening the Assad regime and Russia.

On October 29, the House overwhelmingly passed another measure (403 to 16) threatening sanctions against Turkish officials involved in the incursion. While it is unlikely to get through the Senate without significant modifications, that chamber seems ready to pick its own fights with Turkey. For example, one recent Senate bill calls for a report assessing the viability of relocating U.S. strategic assets from Incirlik Air Base. Adding to the tensions, the House also overwhelmingly approved the nonbinding Armenian genocide resolution last month, despite shelving the vote for years.

Indeed, Congress is keen on differentiating itself from the White House's handling of relations with Erdogan. Yet legislators need to be aware that any further sanctions would likely push Ankara closer to Moscow.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, Erdogan has found ways of leveraging Trump and Putin against each other to maximize Turkish gains in Syria. After obtaining Trump's assent for the cross-border incursion, he brokered a similar deal with Putin at an [October 22 meeting in Sochi \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-sochi-summit-potential-outcomes-and-implications\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-sochi-summit-potential-outcomes-and-implications). Yet his Washington trip will require a different approach: namely, building confidence with Congress and government agencies beyond the White House. More important, his security detail must avoid confronting protestors again. The visit will be considered a success if it does not add yet another layer of disagreement and discontent to bilateral relations.

For his part, President Trump is eager to maintain his good relations with Erdogan while giving the appearance of responding to concerns voiced by other U.S. policymakers. Following Turkey's incursion, the White House issued rather soft sanctions against Ankara on October 14, targeting the assets of a few cabinet ministers. Yet it quickly lifted those sanctions on October 23 after securing a Turkish ceasefire in Syria.

Even so, the Trump-Erdogan relationship seems to be one of the few bilateral channels still in good working order at a time of acute policy differences and eroding confidence between institutions in both countries. Policymakers should therefore consider how best to address their concerns via this channel.

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 \(https://www.erdogansempire.com/\)](https://www.erdogansempire.com/). Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at the Institute and author of its recent paper '[Shifting Landscape: Russia's Military Role in the Middle East \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-in-the-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-in-the-middle-east).' Lt. Col. Conor Hiney (USAF) is a military fellow at the Institute. Dana Stroul, the Institute's Kassen Fellow, previously served as a senior staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. ❖

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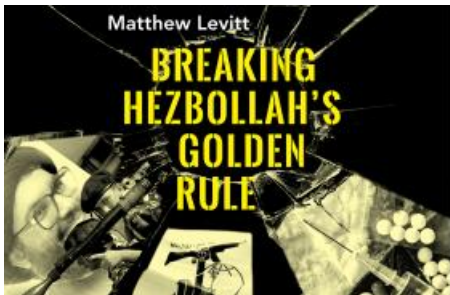
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