

# Trump's Letter to Turkey's Erdogan Shows the U.S. Is Struggling to Keep Up with Ankara

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

Oct 16, 2019

Also available in

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/namh-tramp-bh-ardwghan-amryka-dr-tqla-bray-hmgamy-ba-ankara\)](/fa/policy-analysis/namh-tramp-bh-ardwghan-amryka-dr-tqla-bray-hmgamy-ba-ankara)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Articles & Testimony

---

**Erdogan has achieved his primary goal of breaking the U.S.-YPG partnership by leveraging Trump and Putin against each other, but Russia and Iran won't let him exit Syria scot-free.**

**P**resident Donald Trump's letter to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/don-t-be-tough-guy-trump-s-extraordinary-letter-erdogan-n1067746>), urging him not to go after an enemy [Kurdish military group in neighboring Syria](https://nbcmontana.com/news/nation-world/turkeys-offensive-into-syria-more-casualties-displacement) (<https://nbcmontana.com/news/nation-world/turkeys-offensive-into-syria-more-casualties-displacement>) as U.S. troops depart the war-torn country, indicates that the U.S. president wants to corner his Turkish counterpart. But Erdogan, who has run Turkey for nearly two decades, may well be smarter than to let himself be trapped.

So far, the Turkish president shows no sign of stopping his relentless advance despite the [threat of American sanctions Trump delivered in his missive](https://www.msnbc.com/deadline-white-house/watch/this-letter-trump-sent-to-erdogan-is-so-weird-we-had-to-check-with-the-white-house-to-make-sure-it-s-real-71409221925) (<https://www.msnbc.com/deadline-white-house/watch/this-letter-trump-sent-to-erdogan-is-so-weird-we-had-to-check-with-the-white-house-to-make-sure-it-s-real-71409221925>), made public Wednesday but penned last week. Erdogan has calculated that even if the sanctions come, they won't be sufficient to disrupt the Turkish military strategy; he figures that what [Trump wants most is to bring U.S. troops home](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-withdraws-assad-putin-are-emerging-winners-syria-n1066231) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-withdraws-assad-putin-are-emerging-winners-syria-n1066231>), and he won't do much more to prevent the offensive against the Kurds.

Erdogan is without doubt the most consequential Turkish leader in nearly a century. The move is just the latest example of Erdogan's ability to play off major world powers to get what he wants—though at the cost of his international relationships.

In 1923, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk established modern Turkey in his image as a secular state oriented toward Europe

and the West. Styling himself as the new Atatürk since becoming prime minister in 2003

(<https://www.apnews.com/bca8d87effb448e4899b59586a29d71e>), Erdogan

(<https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/26/middleeast/recep-tayyip-erdogan-fast-facts/index.html>) has revolutionized Turkish politics, striving to recast the country from the top down in his own image: profoundly Islamic and socially conservative.

Moreover, Erdogan's "new Turkey" is primarily oriented not toward the West but the Middle East. Erdogan wants to see Ankara (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/erdogan-rejects-syria-ceasefire-ahead-pence-pompeo-visit-n1067211>) rising as a great power with influence over Muslims across Turkey's former Ottoman Empire possessions.

Erdogan's quest for greatness for Turkey is not unusual. It is, in many ways, a continuation of the policies of the Ottoman sultans as well as Atatürk, all of whom sought great power.

However, Erdogan's path to the same end is different. While his predecessors folded Turkey into the West to exert global influence, Erdogan's goal is to make Turkey a stand-alone power (<https://nbcmontana.com/news/nation-world/turkey-defies-its-nato-allies-in-syria-as-russia-steps-in>): first in the Middle East, then globally.

Accordingly, Erdogan has sought to influence the affairs of Turkey's Muslim-majority neighbors. One of his most dramatic moves on this score has been to intervene in neighboring Syria's civil war by supporting and arming rebels trying to oust the regime of Bashar al-Assad—hoping to replace him with leadership in Damascus friendly to Ankara.

The United States has also intervened in Syria. Most substantially, following the rise of the Islamic State militant group that flourished in the vacuum created by Syria's war, the U.S. started to partner in 2014 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/10/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-kurds-history-facts.html>) with the Syrian Kurdish group YPG. That has helped make the YPG a part of the most effective force fighting ISIS and challenging Assad.

But the YPG, or Kurdish People's Protection Units, is an off-shoot (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-officials-admit-ypg-is-an-offshoot-of-the-pkk-147445>) of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has committed repeated attacks on Turkish civilians as part of its decades-long war with Ankara. The PKK is a terror-designated entity by Turkey, the U.S. and other NATO member countries.

Turkey never accepted the U.S. policy of working with a group that reports to its sworn enemy, but it tolerated it as long as it was tactical and helped undermine ISIS. In the aftermath of the fall of ISIS's "caliphate" in 2017, though, Ankara started to insist that Washington end its relationship with the YPG. American officials had previously told Turkey that its cooperation with the Syrian Kurds was not just tactical, but also temporary and transactional—a message recounted to me by numerous U.S. officials.

After Washington did not wean itself from the YPG at the speed Ankara wanted, Erdogan last week decided to launch a military offensive into Syria. His goal: to undermine the YPG's budding political presence and strengthening enclave in northeastern Syria.

To this end, Erdogan called Trump on Oct. 6. Although the White House later denied it, the readout (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/>) of the call suggests that Trump indeed greenlighted the assault. Trump, who does not want to keep U.S. troops in Syria any longer, gladly offered to withdraw American forces from Syria and pave the way for the Turkish incursion so Ankara could take responsibility for the battle against ISIS.

Similarly, Russian President Vladimir Putin also tacitly approved of the Turkish offensive, hoping that subsequent events would bog Turkey and Washington down further in Syria. The YPG collapsed

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-invasion-isis.html>) like a house of cards only four days into the Turkish military operation against it.

In January 2018, Erdogan used a similar tactic, [complaining \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aftrin-erdogan/turkey-foiled-syrian-move-into-aftrin-after-putin-talks-erdogan-idUSKCN1G411I\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aftrin-erdogan/turkey-foiled-syrian-move-into-aftrin-after-putin-talks-erdogan-idUSKCN1G411I) to Putin about the protection the Russian and Assad regime had extended to the YPG in its other enclave, in northwestern Syria. That resulted in Putin—who has a new policy of courting Erdogan—giving Ankara its own green light for an offensive against the YPG, culminating in a complete takeover of the Kurdish area by Turkey and its allies in Syria.

Erdogan has achieved his primary goal of breaking the U.S.-YPG partnership thanks to his crafty policy of leveraging Trump and Putin against each other, and manipulating Washington by playing on the theme that Moscow is willing to do more for Turkey regarding the YPG than is the U.S.

But notwithstanding this military victory, Erdogan’s policy has had mixed results. While delivering a serious blow to the Kurds, he has failed to shape the outcome of events in Syria, where Turkey-backed rebels have been overwhelmed by the support Assad has received from Russia and Iran. Both countries are historic Turkish adversaries, and in the end neither side will allow Erdogan to exit the war in Syria with glory.

In the broader Middle East, the Turkish president’s backing of the Muslim Brotherhood has put him at odds with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other countries that see the political Islamist group as their greatest domestic threat. It’s also a reason why Israel, once a close ally of Turkey’s, has started to align with Gulf monarchies against Erdogan.

Accordingly, and ironically, Turkey has not only failed to earn star-power status in the region but, as of 2019, has actually been left with no Middle Eastern friends other than Qatar.

What’s more, Turkey can no longer rely on its traditional allies, such as the U.S. and European states. Although Erdogan has had some success in building influence across the Balkans and Africa thanks to local dynamics in these regions, his policies have left Turkey overall more isolated than ever. The letter from Trump is only more harsh evidence of the bridges he’s burned.

This doesn’t mean the complete bankruptcy of Erdogan’s foreign policy, however. Ankara is currently stuck among the NATO-led West, the Muslim Middle East and the Russian “North,” and Erdogan will continue to play these blocs against one another as he has done in northern Syria to get at least some of what he wants: more territory, a diminished Kurdish threat and a “say” in Syria’s future.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the new book [Erdogan’s Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East \(https://www.erdogansempire.com/\)](https://www.erdogansempire.com/). This article was originally published on the NBC News website (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/turkey-s-erdogan-plays-trump-putin-he-tries-remake-middle-ncna1067736>). ❖*

NBC News

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

### TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](/policy-analysis/turkey)

