

Turkey and U.S. Enter Most Important Crisis in Recent Memory

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Oct 10, 2017

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Even if Erdogan strikes a deal to keep the crisis from boiling over, Washington has shown him that there are limits to U.S. tolerance of his authoritarian balancing act.

On Sunday, the U.S. embassy announced the suspension of Turkish visa applications for the U.S., stating that "recent events...have forced the United States government to reassess the commitment of the government of Turkey to the security of U.S. mission facilities and personnel." In retaliation, the Turkish government suspended its own visa services to U.S. citizens early Monday morning. As the diplomatic crisis continues, *The Cipher Brief's* Fritz Lodge [spoke with \(https://www.thecipherbrief.com/turkey-u-s-enter-important-crisis-recent-memory\)](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/turkey-u-s-enter-important-crisis-recent-memory) Soner Cagaptay, the Beyer Family Fellow and Turkish Research Program director at The Washington Institute, about the negative shift in Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's perception of his country's relationship with the United States.

The Cipher Brief: How significant is this imposition of mutual visa restrictions between the U.S. and Turkey?

Soner Cagaptay: I think it's a pretty significant crisis point, probably the most important crisis in recent memory in terms of U.S.-Turkish ties. The last time bilateral ties between the two countries hit a crisis point like this would be late 1970s, in the aftermath of the Cyprus war, when the U.S. had slapped some arms embargoes and sanctions on Turkey and there was pretty significant anti-American sentiment in Turkey with the background of rising far-left and working-class movements.

Since then, we have not witnessed a similar alignment of the perfect storm where you have a state of crisis in the relationship and at the same time pretty potent anti-American sentiments in Turkey. So that's the first time since the 1970s that the relationship faces a severe crisis.

TCB: What prompted the initial U.S. restrictions, in your mind?

Cagaptay: I think the U.S. response was building up. Washington had taken issue with the arrests of U.S. citizens, including dual citizens, in Turkey in the aftermath of the coup. Turkey was denying the United States legal access to U.S. citizens. And the straw that broke the camel's back was the arrest of a bunch of Foreign Service nationals -- Turkish nationals who work at a U.S. mission. One was arrested in Adana, another in Istanbul just recently, and there was news that a third would be. That's why Washington reacted.

It seems to me that, following the second arrest, Washington basically decided to slow down visa applications for official purposes and then warned Turkey that should further arrests come, Washington would suspend all visa applications from Turkey. And that's exactly what they did. When Turkish authorities went to the house of a third Turkish citizen working at the U.S. mission and questioned his wife and his kids, the U.S. government reacted. That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

TCB: And what are the key drivers in Turkey's decision to take these actions to harass or arrest these officials? Do they extend just beyond the Gulen issue?

Cagaptay: There's a bigger issue here. It's not just the arrests of U.S. citizens in Turkey. It's the changing view of Erdogan in the administration in Washington and the accumulating sentiment. The coup last year eliminated the gradualist Erdogan and replaced him with an absolutist Erdogan in terms of power consolidation. He was known for his very successful Machiavellian politics of gradually eroding democratic checks and balances and gradually pushing opposition away or subjugating opposition under his rule. After the coup, a very absolutist Erdogan appeared.

Erdogan has accumulated more power since the coup, in the last year and a half, than the 14- to 15-year period that came before the coup. Part of that, of course, is the fact he's deeply traumatized by the coup. But the other part of it is that Turkey's democracy, which was gradually chipped away by Erdogan, is now completely undermined by him.

The view in Washington of democracy in Turkey has shifted as the gradualist Erdogan is replaced by the absolutist Erdogan. You can then add to this multiple arrests of U.S. citizens who were then denied legal counsel or access to their lawyers or U.S. embassy personnel, and the rolling arrests of Foreign Service nationals.

TCB: Do you think there is an electoral calculus behind the Turkish government's actions?

Cagaptay: Not right now. Turkey does not face elections until 2019. I think Erdogan is free of electoral concerns right now. Some people are suggesting the bigger picture issue of why Erdogan would be arresting some U.S. Foreign Service nationals and citizens is that he wants to trade a certain Turkish businessman, Reza Zerrab, who is in the United States and allegedly helped bust U.S. sanctions against Iran through a deal that involved gold trading. He recently arrived in the United States and was arrested, and some people are suggesting that Zerrab is Erdogan's black box and he wants to trade for him, and that's why he's arresting a number of U.S. citizens in Turkey, so he can have a tradeoff.

That may have backfired, because Washington's reaction has shown that, whereas for the last 15 years, [the] U.S. cut Erdogan a lot of slack, gave him the benefit of the doubt, looked the other way when it came to democratic transgressions, always reminding itself that Turkey is bigger than Erdogan, this time Washington decided to react differently. Hence Washington almost deliberately launched a step it knew would precipitate a crisis. And for the United States in terms of Erdogan, something has shifted. This is not the first time Erdogan has been labeled an authoritarian leader, I think this is his brand, one he has gradually acquired in the last few years.

The question would be, why would Washington -- which looked the other way when it came to Erdogan's transgressions for nearly 15 years and avoided a crisis with Turkey at any cost -- now launch a step it knew would precipitate a crisis? I think that has a lot to do with the perception that Erdogan was about to cross a line in the relationship with the U.S. because the U.S. had asked him to refrain from arresting Foreign Service nationals

working for U.S. missions and Turkey.

TCB: There's a lot of talk about Turkey's drift away from NATO and possibly toward Russia, particularly with the agreement of the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia. Do you see that as playing much of a part here, or is that stretching it too far?

Cagaptay: It's part of this shifting view of Erdogan. There are two parts -- one, an increasing suspension of rights and liberties after the coup, the end of gradualist Erdogan and the arrival of absolutist Erdogan, which I think has soured U.S. views of Turkey as a democratic ally. The second is that, again, something that's shifted after the coup -- until the coup, Erdogan played a masterful game of balancing Turkey's ties to its Western allies, including NATO and the U.S. and indulging in foreign policy endeavors with unconventional and unsavory actors. Everyone kind of accepted that was Turkey's foreign policy, that Turkey would reach out to Iran, the Assad regime before the Syrian war, Russia, yet at the same time would maintain contact with U.S. and NATO allies. That was the balancing game he played before the coup.

After the coup, that foreign policy balancing game Erdogan played so well is not there anymore. Maybe part of that is because Erdogan believes Gulen is behind the coup and is in the U.S. Maybe it's because the U.S. was delayed in issuing a condemnation of the coup. Maybe it's because it took weeks for U.S. officials, then-Vice President Joe Biden, to go to Ankara and wish them well. Not everyone is convinced the U.S. was and is 100 percent behind Turkey when it comes to the coup. This has kind of allowed him to recalibrate, where he's no longer playing the masterful game of balancing Turkey's ties to its Western allies and engaging unsavory partners, and more and more engaging unsavory partners.

I'll give you two examples -- the Iranian chief of staff visited Turkey recently, and the last time the Iranian chief of staff visited Turkey was before the revolution in Iran, the Islamic Revolution in 1979. And the second was Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro visited Turkey, and the last time a Venezuelan president visited Turkey was as far as I can remember, never, in recent memory. There's concern of course in Washington that Turkey's foreign policy, which was already this mix-up of problematic and pragmatic, is now more problematic and in fact not pragmatic at all. Perhaps that is part of the shifting Erdogan dynamic that we're talking about.

TCB: What is the path forward here? How far could this crisis escalate? How could it affect U.S. interests if it becomes a full-blown crisis? And how could the U.S. calm this down?

Cagaptay: The minimum Erdogan will have to do is release the Foreign Service nationals who work for the U.S. missions. Although they are Turkish citizens and they don't have diplomatic immunity, there is a gentleman's agreement between countries that such nationals who work for foreign missions are given some kind of protection. I think the U.S. will insist on this. I think Washington knows that if these Foreign Service nationals are not protected, they will not find Turkish citizens to work for U.S. missions. The question is whether Turkey can agree to releasing those arrested and promise not to arrest further Turkish citizens working for U.S. missions. Erdogan might accept that deal, but he also has to be given something so it looks like he is not losing. Remember, his brand for the last 15 years has been as the person who wins and wins and wins, so he has to absolutely come out of this as the winner. Again, if that kind of a deal can be ironed out, then we have a deal.

I think it's likely we could have a deal, where Turkey agrees to release those Foreign Service nationals and frames it in such a way that it doesn't look like the loser. Erdogan will of course emerge from this crisis scarred, because Washington, which has managed Erdogan for the last 15 years and always avoided conflict, always looked the other way when it came to his transgressions, diplomatic and other, for the first time did not. That is a significant political shot for Erdogan. So even if we have a resolution of the issue, his view of the United States will never be the same again. ❖

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