

Four Things to Watch During Turkish President Erdogan's Visit to Washington

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Mar 29, 2016

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Erdogan's interactions with President Obama could shed light on long-gestating proposals for retaking ISIS-held areas in northern Syria, as well as the status of recent bilateral tensions and the future of Turkish policy toward the Kurds.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is in Washington this week for a nuclear security summit. Here are four key issues to watch.

COOPERATION ON ISLAMIC STATE

IISIS controls a 60-mile-wide strip in northern Syria along the Turkish border by which it smuggles weapons and fighters into Syria and exports fighters into Europe. The carnage inflicted in last week's attacks in Brussels has made capturing this area an even higher priority for Western leaders. U.S. and Turkish officials have discussed cooperation for several months on how to retake the area, with the U.S. providing intelligence assistance and air support to Turkish special forces and Ankara-backed rebels. President Erdogan's visit is an opportunity to deliver on his government's promises to supply a robust ground force and launch efforts with Washington to cut off this key ISIS supply route. This would help stabilize Turkey and add to Mr. Erdogan's political capital in Europe and in the U.S.

PRESIDENTIAL RELATIONS

Barack Obama reached out to then-Prime Minister Erdogan early in his presidency, valuing a relationship with a Muslim leader, and the two leaders spoke often between 2009 and 2012. Mr. Erdogan enjoyed a state visit to Washington in May 2013. But ties between the leaders have been strained since Mr. Erdogan's government violently suppressed protests in Gezi Park that summer that were initially about urban development but morphed into larger protests over freedom of expression in Turkey and government encroachment on secularism and gender equality.

That July, Mr. Erdogan publicly blamed Washington for the military coup in Egypt. The relationship has been rocky since, and the situation is not helped by the Turkish government's support for Islamists in Egypt and Syria. Mr. Erdogan sought to accompany President Obama to the opening of a large mosque and social services complex supported by the Turkish government, but the White House refused.

KURDISH POLICY

For decades the Turkish government has battled the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a militant group that both Washington and Ankara recognize as a terrorist organization. But the U.S. sees Syrian Kurdish fighters as a tactical ally against Islamic State and views Mr. Erdogan's campaign against the PKK as reversing progress on the Kurdish issue. Over the past decade, Mr. Erdogan's government had significantly improved rights for Kurds in Turkey. It also pursued peace talks with the PKK's leader, but those discussions collapsed last summer. Hundreds have since been killed in fighting that has inflicted massive damage on Kurdish-majority cities in southeastern Turkey. U.S. officials still hope that Syrian Kurds aligned with the Party for Democratic Unity, an offshoot of the PKK, could follow the model of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, in effect governing some areas while maintaining good ties with Ankara, and helping to shield Turkey from instability. To the Turkish government, this is anathema so long as Ankara is locked in a battle against the PKK.

GROWING INSTABILITY

Since assuming power in 2002, Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has improved Turkey's economy and infrastructure, and established nearly universal health care. Turkey has become a middle-income country. But Mr. Erdogan's electoral victories are characterized by political demonizing and violent crackdowns on demographic blocs less inclined to support him -- such as the Gezi park protestors, other leftists and liberals, secularists, social-democrats, the liberal Alevi Muslim minority, and Kurds. Nearly half of the Turkish electorate is unified in their dislike -- and, in some cases, outright hatred -- of their country's president. Meanwhile, the conservative and Islamist segments adore Mr. Erdogan. He resigned as head of the AKP in 2014 to become president, a non-partisan and mostly symbolic post in Turkey's system of parliamentary democracy. Since then, Mr. Erdogan has run the country and the AKP from behind the scenes, igniting much controversy along the way. Now, he wants to cobble together a majority to amend Turkey's constitution and consolidate the power of the executive and legislative branches in his hands, as well as becoming chairman of the AKP again. The looming cost would be to further divide Turkey, a country that in just the past five months has been hit hard by five terrorist attacks. A country torn between Erdogan supporters and opponents is vulnerable to influence and further violence by extremists.

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(<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/03/29/four-things-to-watch-during-turkish-president-erdogans-visit-to-washington>)



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