



Troubling signals. Turkish soldiers stand next to a tank during a military drill near the town of Silopi close to the Habur border gate between Turkey and Iraq, on September 20. (AP)

Turkey to launch intervention into Syria – and maybe into Iraq

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Turkey is preparing to send troops into northern Syria, months after ending an intervention that angered the United States. At the same time, Ankara is pondering a military response to the Kurdish independence vote in Iraq.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan used his visit to the UN General Assembly, which included a meeting with US President Donald Trump, to announce the cross-border operation into Syria.

“Our soldiers on the border are ready for a mission at any moment,” Erdogan told a business forum sponsored by Bloomberg News. He later told Reuters news agency the Turkish troops would enter Idlib, a Syrian province bordering the southern Turkish region of Hatay.

After returning to Ankara, Erdogan led a meeting of Turkey’s National Security Council. A draft resolution for a special session of Turkey’s parliament, quoted by Turkey’s official Anadolu news agency, gave the country’s armed forces the green light to send sol-

diers to Syria as well as to Iraq.

Erdogan spoke of unspecified “sanctions” against the Kurdish independence referendum in northern Iraq. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said the referendum was an “issue of Turkey’s national security” and that Turkey would use its “natural rights.”

Turkey has had military exercises on the border of northern Iraq. Pro-government media in Turkey reported that the Turkish military could establish a buffer zone in Iraqi territory to stop a possible flow of refugees from northern Iraq.

It was not known whether Erdogan discussed a possible military response to the Kurdish vote in his 50-minute meeting with Trump. Following the meeting, the White House and the Turkish Presidential Office said the two leaders had warned of “serious consequences” of the referendum.

Both the United States and Turkey have warned the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq that the referendum would bring new turmoil to the region and would weaken the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS). The United States has called on the Kurds to postpone the vote but the KRG said it would go ahead. Erdogan has said his country would not “allow” the

creation of a Kurdish state in Iraq.

Erdogan said the impending Turkish intervention into Syria was part of a de-escalation agreement brokered by Russia. The de-escalation zones, agreed by Turkey, Russia and Iran, would be further discussed in talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ankara, Erdogan told Reuters.

“Under the agreement, Russians are maintaining security outside Idlib and Turkey will maintain the security inside Idlib region,” Erdogan said.

● Erdogan spoke of unspecified “sanctions” against the Kurdish independence referendum in northern Iraq.

In addition to Putin’s scheduled September 28 visit to Turkey, Erdogan is to travel to Iran on October 4.

The planned Turkish action comes half a year after Ankara ended “Operation Euphrates Shield” in which Turkish troops and tanks moved into northern Syria in the Jarabulus and Al-Bab regions. The intervention was designed to check the advance of Kurdish forces there

that are allied with the United States in the fight against ISIS.

There was no official US reaction to Erdogan’s announcement. The Turkish leader has publicly accused the Trump administration of supporting terrorists by sending weapons to a Syrian Kurdish militia fighting ISIS; Ankara says the Kurdish fighters are a subgroup of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a rebel organisation that has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984. Washington says cooperation with the Syrian Kurds is purely tactical and will end when ISIS is defeated.

Besides their clashing priorities in the Syrian conflict, the two NATO allies have a range of other differences. Erdogan is calling on the United States to extradite the Pennsylvania-based Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen, accused by the Turkish government of being behind last year’s coup attempt. Another source of friction is a US court case against one of Erdogan’s former cabinet ministers, who is accused of violating sanctions against Iran.

Despite their bilateral problems, Trump and Erdogan were all smiles at the start of their meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Trump said Erdogan had “be-

come a friend of mine” and voiced respect for the Turkish leader’s stance in what he called “a very difficult part of the world.”

“He’s involved very, very strongly and, frankly, he’s getting very high marks,” Trump said about Erdogan, adding that US-Turkish relations were “as close as we have ever been and a lot of that has to do with the personal relationship.” Erdogan addressed Trump as “my dear friend Donald.”

Aykan Erdemir, a former Turkish lawmaker who works for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington think-tank, said the friendly statements by the two presidents masked the fact that US-Turkish relations were severely strained.

“Trump is trying to manage the stormy relations between the US and Turkey at the interpersonal level,” Erdemir said via e-mail. He said the Trump administration viewed Erdogan’s Turkey more like a business associate than as a close ally with which America shared values and interests.

“Ankara is increasingly becoming a transactional partner in and of the Middle East that the US needs to manage for its continued cooperation in a challenging part of the world,” Erdemir said.

Turkey adrift in uncharted waters



Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.

It was a swift exchange between two NATO allies at the highest level. The Turkish president claimed the US president had apologised for the incident last May when his bodyguards severely beat peaceful Kurdish demonstrators outside the Turkish Embassy in Washington.

“Actually, (US) President (Donald) Trump called me about a week ago about this issue,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told PBS’s Judy Woodruff. “He said that he was sorry and he told me that he was going to follow up on this issue when we come to the United States within the framework of an official visit. The protesters were insulting us and they were screaming and shouting. The police failed to intervene properly.”

In a matter of hours, came a blunt denial. “The topic was discussed. There was no apology,” White House Deputy Press Secretary Lindsay Walters told CNN.

The bizarre yo-yo of claim-counterclaim between Erdogan and the Americans has become somewhat routine. Some say the Turkish attitude shows the manipulateness

of its leader and his propensity for fake statements. True or not, such episodes mark a new low for the Turkish-American relationship.

On the surface, everything looks fine. Trump praised Erdogan on September 21, saying it was “a great honour” to host the Turkish president. He “is becoming a friend of mine (and) he is running a very difficult part of the world,” Trump said. “Frankly he’s getting very high marks.” Trump concluded that the two countries were “right now as close as we’ve ever been.”

Are these sentiments entirely false? It’s hard to ignore the extent to which Erdogan has become a figure of hate in the United States. “You are not welcome” was the headline of a three-page ad, purchased by a human rights group, in the Metro New York newspaper the day after Erdogan arrived in the city for the UN General Assembly. The day before he left, protesters were bruised in a brawl involving Erdogan’s security detail that started when the Turkish president was speaking at New York hotel.

It is hard to find a US congressman who will express public support for Erdogan and the state of

the relationship could be symbolised by his meeting with Trump. Erdogan was the last leader to meet with the US president, for a mere 30 minutes before Trump left to play golf.

Analysts draw definitive conclusions. “There is no question that Washington and Ankara have been experiencing perhaps the most difficult period in their bilateral relationship since the 1974 Cyprus crisis,” noted Henri Barkey, a professor of international relations at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

He said the situation has arisen out of recent developments in “the Syria cauldron” and the Erdogan regime’s determination “to play a new and anti-systemic international role.” Turkey’s dependence on the West for its economic and political well-being may not survive long, he added.

The core issue is Erdogan’s ability to reclaim trust. As time goes on, there is a widening gap between his political domination at home and enforced solitude abroad. His moves to gain international influence are backfiring, mainly because of his heavy-handed style. Erdogan regards disagreement as a

threat that must be countered with disproportionate force.

A source in Washington claimed Erdogan proposed a prisoner swap to Trump. The American priest Andrew Brunson, who is held in a Turkish prison for alleged ties to Gulenists, would be exchanged for Reza Zarrab, the Iranian gold trader charged by the United States for conspiring to violate the Iranian embargo along with high-level Turkish officials, including the former Turkish economy minister. The source said Trump deemed such a swap unthinkable among NATO partners.

Only a couple of weeks before Erdogan’s visit to New York, a federal court in the city issued an arrest order for the former Turkish minister Zafer Caglayan. It is not hard to imagine Erdogan’s perception of such developments.

The turmoil in world politics shows the importance of leadership style and the defining force of leaders’ impulses. From Ankara, there are repeated instances of erratic behaviour. The more frustrated the Turkish president becomes, the louder he speaks and Turkey’s position is ever more imperilled.

The turmoil in world politics shows the importance of leadership style and the defining force of leaders’ impulses.