

Acrimony flares up ahead of visits by top American officials to Turkey

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Washington

As tensions between the United States and Turkey over Syria rise ahead of visits by top US officials to Ankara and Istanbul, Turkish leaders are pointing out their close cooperation with Russia.

The pro-government Turkish media said the United States has become an “enemy” as Ankara’s troops push into the Afrin region of north-western Syria to drive out Kurdish rebels allied with Washington. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the Americans of lying to their NATO partner and prepared for another summit on Syria with the presidents of Russia and Iran after an initial trilateral meeting last November.

In Afrin, Turkish Army units are fighting members of the Peoples’ Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian-Kurdish militia seen as a terrorist group by Ankara but as a partner in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) by Washington.

Concerned about the widening Turkish-US rift, the Trump administration is sending two top officials to Turkey. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, going to Ankara, and national security adviser H.R. McMaster, headed for Istanbul, are to be in the country within a few days of each other.

Analysts said Tillerson and McMaster should brace for tough rhetoric in their meetings with Turkish officials. “In Ankara, it’s better to be a Russian official than a NATO ally these days,” said Aykan Erdemir, a senior fellow at the Washington think-tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and a former Turkish lawmaker. Turkey needs Russia’s permission for its operation in Afrin, he said.

In a survey by the Optimar polling institute, almost 72% of Turkish respondents described themselves as “anti-US,” and another 22.7% said they were “partially anti-US.” The poll said 62.1% of Turks asked said they favoured closer ties between their country and Russia. Optimar’s head, Hilmi Dasdemir, told the government-run Anadolu



Turbulence ahead. US national security adviser H.R. McMaster listens as he sits between White House economic adviser Gary Cohn (L), Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Vice-President Mike Pence (R) during a joint news conference at the White House in Washington, last January. (Reuters)

news agency that anti-US sentiments had never run higher.

Erdogan is doing little to break the trend. During a trip to Italy, the Turkish leader said former US President Barack Obama had “lied” to Turkey by promising a YPG retreat from the northern Syrian city of Manbij. Despite the assurances, the YPG is still in Manbij. “Unfortunately, Obama lied to us in this respect,” Erdogan said, adding that the Trump administration was “apparently going in the same direction.”

Ankara called on the United States to withdraw its soldiers from Manbij, which could become the next target of Turkey’s military operation in Syria. Washington said

its personnel will stay where they are.

Two high-ranking US generals recently met with Kurdish-led troops in Manbij. “We’re very proud of our positions here and we want to make sure everybody knows it,” US Army Major-General Jamie Jarrard, commander of US Special Operations in Iraq and

Syria, said during the visit, New York Times reported.

US Army Lieutenant-General Paul Funk, commander of the US-led coalition against ISIS, issued a thinly veiled warning to Turkey: “You hit us, we will respond aggressively. We will defend ourselves.”

The pro-government newspaper Yeni Safak said Funk had “threatened” Turkey and the English-language Daily Sabah commented that US generals were “turning into warlords in Syria.”

As Tillerson and McMaster prepared to face their Turkish colleagues in an increasingly hostile atmosphere, a debate about the origin of a YPG missile showed the extent of Turkey’s distrust towards

the United States. The missile in question destroyed a Turkish tank in northern Syria and killed five Turkish soldiers on February 3.

Erdogan said it is too early to say something about the type and source of the missile. Turkish media reported that the missile was a Russia-type Konkurs but that did not stop the pro-government media from pinning the blame for the death of the soldiers on the United States.

Yeni Safak reported that the Konkurs missiles were part of US weapons supplies for the YPG, adding that the shoulder-fired missiles used to down a Russian fighter jet over Syria’s Idlib province on February 3 also came from the United States. Washington denied supplying those weapons to armed groups in Syria.

“The YPG has repeatedly used Russia-made anti-tank missile 9M113 Konkurs against Turkish targets in Afrin,” Erdemir wrote via e-mail. “Turkey’s pro-government media, however, [have] been quick to put the blame on the US and made repeated calls for closing the Incirlik Airbase in retaliation, conveniently covering up the Russian connection. This shows that the Turkish government’s priority is maintaining cordial relations with Moscow even if it requires smearing its NATO ally Washington.”

Incirlik Airbase in southern Turkey is used to stage attacks on ISIS targets in Syria by fighter jets of a US-led international coalition.

Following the downing of the Russian jet in Idlib, Turkey used its ties to Islamic rebels in the region to return the remains of the Russian pilot, Major Roman Filipov, to Russia. Filipov reportedly killed himself with a hand grenade to avoid being captured. Moscow said Russian military intelligence took Filipov’s body back “in cooperation with Turkish colleagues.”

Turkish pronouncements against the United States are also connected to the country’s election calendar, Erdemir said. “Washington is a convenient whipping boy in Turkish politics and anti-Americanism will continue to be the cornerstone of Erdogan’s re-election strategy in the run-up to 2019 elections” when Turks choose a new president, Erdemir wrote.

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Viewpoint



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Turkey-US rupture ever more likely

The plot thickens as Turkey prepares to mark the first full month of its incursion into northern Syria’s Kurdish enclave of Afrin. Perhaps it was the Turkish operation that completed the picture of a four-dimensional, open-ended war game but Syria’s reality is becoming ever more complex.

The interests of multiple actors are coming into conflict. None can claim to determine what happens next. Meanwhile, it’s safe to say the Syrian conflict suffers from a pronounced disconnect between players’ words and deeds.

Foreign policy expert Dimitar Bechev, writing for Ahval online, quoted a Human Rights Watch analyst: “If this is de-escalation, I would hate to imagine what escalation looks like.”

It’s hard to disagree. Hostilities involve at least seven different armed forces and militia groups. Fighting intensifies without warning, leading to unknown numbers of civilian casualties. Reports of them in Afrin have been so disturbing that even hard-line Turkish Army officers, such as

the former Chief of General Staff Ilker Basbug, suggest the need for greater care.

The Syrian regime’s motivation is transparent – survival – but the intentions of the other actors in the Syrian theatre are not clear and Ankara’s actions are most puzzling of all.

Turkey is neither a game changer nor the one that sets the rules of the game. The incursion is limited by Russia and the United States, both on land and in the air. Then there is the further contradiction of Turkey having a foot in two camps: It is with NATO and that coalition and it is with Russia, Iran and the Astana peace process. It is a risky juggling act.

Russia has chosen to be ambiguous about the Syrian Kurds but it’s unclear if Turkey-US relations will remain resilient despite the clash of strategic interests. The tensions between Turkey and America have been apparent for some time but they escalated after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan demanded that US forces pull out from Manbij.

What is the root cause of the deadlock, then?

For Turkey, the Afrin incursion

serves a dual purpose: Erdogan can keep his country in a “state of war” and this condition may open possibilities for a politically useful extended conflict. Another goal is also crystallising.

After gaining a foothold in Afrin and parts of Idlib adjacent to the Turkish-Syrian border, Ankara said it intended to advance towards northern Iraq, targeting areas controlled by the Kurdish YPG militia. This would go up against the US strategy with respect to the northern Syrian strip along the border.

Two senior US commanders in Manbij sketched out the red lines for Erdogan’s administration. These suggest a political architecture that gives an assured place to the secular Kurdish fighters. They are meant to counter jihadist elements. For Washington, this is more important than the fate of the Assad regime.

The Americans know that it will be unwise to remove support for the Kurds, thereby abandoning the entire area to Russian and Iranian influence. Although its Syria policy is at best wobbly, the Pentagon seems to be weighing in more forcefully than before. It

is visibly flexing its muscles for Ankara to see. Besides, Erdogan no longer has many friends in Washington with the US Congress rumoured to be preparing a resolution that would controversially – and infuriatingly for Turkey – recognise the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 as a genocide.

Anti-Justice and Development Party (AKP) sentiment is reportedly flourishing in Washington to the extent that any escalation could attract US sanctions against Turkey, possibly for human rights abuses or corruption.

This hardening was clear in the Bipartisan Policy Centre’s report that spoke about implementing the Magnitsky Act, a 2012 measure passed by the US Congress that is considered an important development in addressing human rights abuses and corruption.

The Bipartisan Policy Centre’s report noted that “...with Turkey and the United States consistently working at cross purposes in the region, and with the risk of direct US-Turkey confrontation in Manbij, doing nothing should no longer be an option.”

A rupture seems more likely than ever before.

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