

Articles

10 Nov 2017

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Ankara & Washington: Crisis Resolution or Management?

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"Turkish Prime Minister Benali Yildirim is on a visit to the United States for several days." This could have been normal news on a protocol visit between two "allies" unless the relations between the two sides had undergone successive and simultaneous crises recently.

The Turkish-American relationship has undergone several crises over the past decades, including the Cuban missile crisis (1962), the U.S. ban on arms sales to Turkey after its intervention in Cyprus (1974), and the Turkish parliament's denial of Washington's request to deploy U.S. troops through Turkish territory for attacking Baghdad during its invasion of Iraq (2003). However, it is the first time that Washington takes "direct" action in expressing anger towards Turkey, i.e. by suspending visa services at its diplomatic facilities in Turkey. [Ankara then responded in kind and halted visa services in the United States. This came after Turkey arrested a Turkish employee at the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul, Metin Topuz, and summoned another for investigations on charges related to FETO, the organization led by U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom the Turkish government accuses of orchestrating last year's failed coup.] Through a quick assessment of the issues of disagreement between the two parties, we can classify two main issues as well as a number of sub-files:

First: The U.S. military and political support for the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) despite the Turkish reservations.

Second: Washington's procrastination in extraditing - or even arresting or investigating Fethullah Gulen, the first suspect in the failed coup attempt in 2016.

In addition, there are other controversial files, most notably:

- 1) The Turkish authorities' arrest of Pastor Andrew Brunson for issues related to his relationship with the parallel organization [Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization (FETO)].
- 2) The lawsuit filed against President Erdogan's personal guard over a "clash" with pro-PKK demonstrators during Erdogan's recent visit to Washington.

3) The U.S. arrest of Turkish businessman of Iranian origin, Reza Zerab, and Vice-Chairman of the Turkish Halkbank Mehmet Atilla in the United States and prosecuting them for "violation of US economic sanctions on Iran". Also, former Turkish Economy Minister Zafer Caglayan was summoned to testify in this lawsuit which could involve other officials including President Erdogan. However, many observers believe that there was a deal between Zerab and the FBI to implicate Erdogan and other Turkish officials.

4) Turkish authorities' arrest of Metin Topuz, a Turkish employee at the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul (Sunday, Oct. 8) for investigations, and the summoning of another - referred to by the initials N.M.C. on Monday Oct. 9, which angered Washington and resulted in its decision of visa suspension.

In light of all these crises, especially the recent ones related to visa suspension, Yildirim headed to Washington with a delegation including Deputy Prime Minister Mohammad Simsik and ministers of foreign affairs and energy. The context of the visit and the composition of the delegation clearly indicate that the main agenda is handling the recent crises and discussing how to correct the course of relations between the two parties more than anything else.

Binali Yildirim met with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence for an hour and 20 minutes. Yildirim's accompanying delegation as well as U.S. counterparts attended the meeting which was "very fruitful," according to Yildirim, who said the two sides discussed their problems honestly and frankly.

The White House said that the meeting would help "open a new chapter in US-Turkish relations," according to Anadolu Agency. Yildirim was once again optimistic, saying that he noticed "a will to improve relations with mutual confidence and frankness." To what extent has the visit actually melted the ice between the two parties and solved the crises between them?

Perhaps the quickest and best answer to this question is the comment of the Turkish prime minister himself at the airport before leaving for Washington when he said that the problems between the two parties "cannot be solved in one visit".

Perhaps the most significant change has occurred in the last file, i.e. the visa suspension problem. The United States lifted the ban on nonimmigrant visa services at its diplomatic facilities in Turkey on a limited scale immediately prior to Yildirim's visit, a step to which Ankara responded in kind. This could be considered more than a

positive development and a sign of a U.S. desire to skip the latest crisis. In an earlier article on the crisis, I said it was likely to be solved, and that Washington might appoint a new ambassador to Ankara soon. The U.S. media justified the U.S. administration's move by saying that it was built on a Turkish pledge to inform Washington in advance of any judicial process related to any of its employees, which was denied by Turkish officials.

As for the other judicial-political files, the two parties can reach a compromise on them if they have the will to do so, especially that these files are of the kind that can be postponed or procrastinated.

As for the Fethullah Gulen file, Washington does not only procrastinate in the extradition of the Turkish cleric, but it also refuses to arrest or investigate him, or even deal with the evidence provided to the U.S. Justice Department by its Turkish counterpart, according to their mutual agreements in this regard.

It seems that the U.S. procrastination to extradite Fethullah Gulen is aimed at practicing pressures on Turkey, as the West is still betting on Gulen and his organization, especially in light of the many political asylums given by some European countries to officers affiliated with FETO, including Turkey's former NATO representatives, who refused to return home for fear of being brought to trial for participation in the failed coup attempt in 2016.

Yildirim reiterated his country's demands regarding Gulen, hinting that Washington could "at least restrict his activities as a preliminary step". Otherwise, Washington's stance would raise questions on existence of "another reasons".

The last, most dangerous, most important, and most sensitive file: namely the broad U.S. support for the Kurdish armed factions in Syria, as it intersects with what Ankara considers its national security. While Ankara designates the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its various military branches as terrorist organizations, Washington considers the PYD as a local ally and relies on it in confronting ISIS. Furthermore, the U.S. administration has even renounced its earlier commitments for Ankara regarding the withdrawal of the Kurdish Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) from Manbij after "liberating" it from ISIS.

The United States has always said that its cooperation with the Kurdish factions is temporary and limited to the fight against ISIS while the facts on the ground say that the weapons provided by the U.S. to these militias are too much for ISIS confrontation,

which raises the concerns of Turkey about the real reasons behind arming tens of thousands of Kurdish fighters who are now building a regular army to a great extent. Perhaps the eminent end of military confrontation with the Islamic State will be the real test of the American intentions, either abandoning the Democratic Union Party (PYD) after completing its mission (as what happened to Barzani), or maintaining support, cooperation and armament of the Kurdish factions, confirming the idea of different agendas and scenarios drawn for the region in general and for Turkey in particular, as Erdogan said a few days ago. However, it seems that the second possibility is more likely.

In conclusion, it seems that Yildirm's visit will solve some minor problems between Turkey and the United States, and will contribute to reducing the level of tension and escalation between them, but it is very difficult for "one visit" to contribute to solving the main problem files, especially in the absence of a U.S. will to do so. Accordingly, Turkey is expected to continue moving eastwards (in terms of its foreign policy) by enhancing its relations with Russia, China, Iran, and others. Turkey will not restrict its foreign policy "exclusively" to the Western axis any more, but instead it will maintain balance, flexibility and independence⁽¹⁾.

(1) The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIPSS