

Tillerson in Turkey to ease Syria rift

The Arab Weekly staff

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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan March 30th to shore up support from a NATO ally that has edged closer to Russia, is at odds with European powers and remains vehemently opposed to the US strategy of helping a Kurdish group drive the Islamic State (ISIS) from its Syrian capital, Raqqa.

A populist, Erdogan has hopes of hitting it off with new US President Donald Trump.

Turkey's drift towards Russia and growing rift with Europe may not greatly trouble Trump but the big issue dividing the countries with the two biggest armies in NATO is US support for Kurdish forces in northern Syria that have spearheaded the drive towards Raqqa in Iraq and appear central to Washington's strategy of defeating the jihadist group in Syria.

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At his Senate confirmation hearings in January, Tillerson called the Kurds "our greatest allies" in Syria, a sentiment repeated by US administration officials. Ankara, however, is furious at US backing for the People's Protection Units (YPG), which it sees as the Syrian arm of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a separatist group fighting Turkey since 1984.

"Let me be very frank, it's not easy; there are difficult choices that have to be made," Tillerson said at a news conference with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu that followed a 2-hour meeting with Erdogan.

Despite his pre-election boast of having a "secret plan" to defeat ISIS, Trump has largely continued the Obama administration's strategy of backing Syrian Kurdish forces with air strikes.

Though no announcement has been made, after a review of its ISIS strategy, the Trump administration appears to have rebuffed Turkey's offer to extend its military push into northern Syria that began in August and advance towards Raqqa.

Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield drove ISIS back from a 100km stretch of Turkey's border with Syria and drove a wedge between YPG forces hoping to unite their territory and control most of the Turkish frontier.

After taking the towns of Jarabulus, Dabiq and al-Bab from ISIS, the Turkish operation stalled at Kurdish-held Manbij. The deployment in early March of a small group of US forces among the Kurdish defenders of the city may have helped to halt the Turkish advance.

"Operation Euphrates Shield is successful and is finished," Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim declared on the eve of Tillerson's visit. Turkish media said 71 Turkish soldiers were killed in the 7-month operation.

While insisting Turkey and the United States shared a commitment to defeat ISIS, Tillerson said he had explored "a number of options and alternatives" with Turkish leaders for the operation against Raqqa.

Cavusoglu warned that US support for the YPG had harmed relations. "It is not good or realistic to work with a terror group while fighting another terror group," he said.

Turkey is frustrated at the US failure to extradite Pennsylvania-based Turkish cleric and former Erdogan ally Fethullah Gulen to face charges of masterminding a failed July coup. Ankara is also angry about the US arrests of Turkish-

Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab and a Turkish banker accused of subverting US sanctions on Iran.

Through his Hizmet movement's control of hundreds of schools across Turkey and the world, Gulen placed followers in Turkey's civil service, judiciary and military as it helped Erdogan's party rise to power and dominance from 2002.

■ Erdogan has hopes of hitting it off with new US President Donald Trump.

However, Hizmet split with Erdogan in 2013 when prosecutors linked to Gulen launched corruption investigations into relatives of government ministers, accusing them, among other things, of helping Iran avoid US sanctions. Erdogan fired the prosecutors and the cases were dropped.

Germany's intelligence chief and the British parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee have said they were not convinced that Gulen was behind the coup attempt but Cavusoglu said Turkey had presented evidence to the United States and called on prosecutors there to "evaluate the documents meticulously".

Ankara has grounds for optimism the Trump administration will seek an outcome favourable to Turkey. Former CIA director James Woolsey said that ousted US national security adviser Michael Flynn had been paid to lobby for Turkey while assisting the Trump campaign.

The Trump administration on March 11th fired US Prosecutor for the Southern District of New York Preet Bharara, who was responsible for the arrest of Zarrab, the focus of the so-called gold-for-gas operation to skirt US sanctions on Iran. Erdogan, whose son-in-law has been implicated in the alleged conspiracy, has publicly defended Zarrab and accused Bharara of be-



Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu (L) and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrive for a meeting in Ankara, on March 30th. (AFP)

ing entertained by Gulen followers in the United States.

Former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former US attorney general Michael Mukasey, both staunch Trump supporters, have been hired as part of Zarrab's

defence team.

"We are expecting concrete steps," Cavusoglu said, referring to Gulen's extradition. "We need to take mutual steps to put relations with the United States back on track."

What will it take for Erdogan to accept Kurdish reality?

Viewpoint



Yavuz Baydar

With Turkey's policy in Syria and Iraq facing increasing pushback for its anti-Kurdish

stance, Kurds in both countries have noted rapid advances in securing regional influence and moving towards the goal of officially recognised self-rule.

This promises further complications for key players in the Syrian conflict and the battle against jihadists. It also raises the stakes for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has entered the most intense phase of his campaign to gain legitimacy for the single-ruler format of government he has for so long been seeking.

Whether Erdogan fully realises how his position on the Kurds will affect the future of Iraq and Syria and whether he understands the need to revise Turkey's self-destructive Kurdish policy at home and across the country's southern border are unclear.

Recent developments seem to have left Ankara behind. Turkish military forces have been blocked near the strategically important northern Syrian town of Manbij and the US-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), made up mainly of Kurds, have advanced towards Raqqa,

already taking the Tabqa airstrip from the Islamic State (ISIS).

Saleh Muslim, the co-chairman of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic party (PYD), told Reuters that once "freed", Raqqa would join the system of self-rule, a decentralised system of government established by the Syrian Kurdish units. "We expect (this) because our project is for all Syria... and Raqqa can be part of it," he said.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, a new development has caused deep concern in Ankara. Following statements on self-rule by Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Kurdish was added as an official language in the region and the Kurdish flag was raised alongside the Iraqi flag in all official buildings in the politically disputed city of Kirkuk. Arab and Turkmen groups protested the decision and Turkey quickly expressed grave concern.

While Kurds in Iraq and Syria are emboldened by Russian and US support, which they have described as a historic step towards autonomy, recent developments in Turkey point the other way. As Turkey continues to clamp down on elected Kurdish politicians, a court in Diyarbakir ordered lengthy prison sentences for nearly 100 Kurdish politicians being tried on terrorism charges in a case that dates to 2010.

The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) is seen as the backbone of the Kurdish political

movement in Turkey. The verdicts, which were handed down against leading KCK figures such as Ahmet Turk, Firat Anli, Hatip Dicle and Kamuran Yuksek, sentenced the accused to a combined 1,100 years in prison. With 13 MPs sentenced to prison, Turkey has effectively paralysed the Kurdish political sphere.

Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu, who is known for his staunch loyalty to Erdogan, repeatedly promised that the "fight against divisionist terror will go on until the very end".

Meanwhile, military and security operations in Turkey's mainly Kurdish provinces continue with high intensity. One crucial question is whether the region's ballot boxes are secure.

With the situation's growing complexity two years after the Kurdish peace process ended, will Erdogan finally feel the need to revise his policy? This is the most serious question facing Turkey, which is obviously swimming alone against the regional stream.

Until the Turkish referendum takes place April 16th, everything is on hold. The Americans are only engaged in alleviating Turkey's tensions about the Kurdish surge. US President Donald Trump has suggested he will wait to see the results of the referendum. Russian President Vladimir Putin is determined to make Turkey's role in Syria obsolete.

Kurdish politicians in Turkey do not blink about their "no"

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votes in the referendum and remain calm as the clampdown intensifies. There are no signs of the ruling Justice and Development Party (PKK) asking for a return to the peace talks. Pro-Erdogan media figures in Turkey have spelled out that such talks are out of the question at least until the end of 2017.

Still, much of what happens will depend on whether Erdogan's proposal gets a "yes" or a "no" in the referendum. If the presidential system is rejected by the voters, Erdogan will not only be weakened domestically but his ability to negotiate peace will suffer. After all, over the past two years, Erdogan's hard-line policies have mobilised anti-Kurdish old warriors at all levels of the Turkish establishment and he will see no way forward but on the path of denial and oppression.

If Erdogan gets the vote of approval, however, he may feel emboldened to steer his Kurdish policy towards a recognition of the Kurdish role in Syria and Iraq. Because the traditional divide-and-rule policy of Turkey *vis-à-vis* the Kurds no longer seems applicable, Erdogan may be forced to accept seats for the Syrian Kurds at the Geneva peace talks. If this happens after the referendum, it will signal yet another sharp shift in Turkish policy. We'll have to wait and see.

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Kurdish politicians in Turkey remain calm as the clampdown intensifies.