



A New Crack in An Old Alliance

By Kadri Tastan

BRUSSELS — Turkey and the United States are arguably in the lowest point of their relationship. A new diplomatic snap happened last week when the United States suspended non-immigration visa services in Turkey. Turkey responded in kind, making a “copy-paste” of the U.S. communiqué on October 8. How did we get here?

A Muslim country with NATO’s second largest land army, Turkey has always represented a great interest for the United States. Even if the fall of the USSR partially diminished its strategic importance, Turkey has continued to be a crucial NATO Ally. But the lines have started to move over the years, made worse especially with divergence in their respective approaches to the conflict in Syria.

The enormous political transformation that has occurred in Turkey since 2015 and the collapse of the Kurdish peace process have further complicated the relations. Since the countries’ priorities were increasingly divergent — at many times even conflicting — the United States rejected the Turkish proposal to end cooperation with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in return for closer cooperation with Turkey in Syria. Turkey regards YPG as an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), designated a terrorist

organization by both the United States and Turkey, and therefore reacts strongly against U.S. cooperation with this organization.

The 2013 corruption probe against some ministers and members of the Erdoğan family was a critical point in Turkey–U.S. relations. In this case, Fethullah Gülen was declared an enemy of the state, as the operations were said to be carried out by judges and prosecutors linked to the Gülen Movement. Gülen’s residence in the United States with a green card has since been a thorny issue. In 2016, the United States charged Reza Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian businessman who had been arrested during the probe and subsequently released, with conspiring to evade U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran’s banking system. American prosecutors then broadened the investigation on Zarrab, filing a new indictment charging a former minister in Erdoğan’s cabinet and former manager of a Turkish bank, which has further inflamed tensions.

But the coup attempt in July 2016 has been a major turning point in modern Turkish history with highly negative consequences for the country’s relations with the United States and the West. Turkey’s accusation that Gülen is the mastermind behind the coup attempt does not resonate with the United States and the refusal to extradite him has intensely aggravated the situation.



The Turkish government found the U.S. response to the coup attempt ambivalent, creating suspicions about American intentions. For the past year, Turkish press has supplied the public with widespread conspiracy theories about U.S. involvement in the failed coup — a claim strongly denied by the United States — and as a result, anti-Americanism has become more acute in Turkey.

In the midst of deteriorating relations with the West, Turkey has also been arresting an increasing number of foreign nationals, including Americans accused of ties with Gülen, and in some cases with the PKK. For Andrew Brunson, an American pastor who was detained last October and accused of links with the Gülen, President Trump's personal appeal and a letter signed by 78 members of Congress did not help. Erdoğan responded to the request by asking for the extradition of Gülen and other Turkish citizens allegedly linked to his movement in return for releasing Pastor Brunson. Turkey's use of citizens as bargaining chips to extradite Gülen has led many Western officials and analysts to suggest that American or European detainees may have been held in Turkey for political reasons.

In this context of distrust and tensions, the arrest of a Turkish employee of the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul on charges of espionage has thrown oil on fire. This employee was placed in pre-trial detention on October 11 on the decision of an Istanbul court, and was accused of links with Gülen and of conspiring with the Gülen Movement to build the corruption case against the government in 2013. The U.S. decision to suspend visas was announced following this arrest.

Trust between Turkish and American authorities has been disappearing gradually, but this diplomatic breakdown has been a long time coming. The crisis between the two countries is deeper than it seems and necessitates a new transparent dialogue based on trust. If not, the crisis may worsen, even if the visa crisis is resolved.

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