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Transatlantic Take

After the Brunson Affair: What Next for U.S.–Turkish Relations?

By Ian O. Lesser

BRUSSELS — The release of American pastor Andrew Brunson after more than two years of Turkish detention on spurious terrorism charges removes a key obstacle to improvement in U.S.–Turkish relations. Major bilateral differences remain in what continues to be a tough relationship to manage. But both countries will likely seek to move on as they prepare for growing instability in Turkey's neighborhood.

The Brunson affair had become a cause celebre for the Trump administration, animating Vice President Pence, leading figures in Congress and, ultimately, President Trump himself. With the threat of further sanctions on a Turkish economy already reeling from mounting inflation and a falling Turkish lira, Brunson had become the central issue in an increasingly personal confrontation between two combative administrations. Ankara has been at pains to stress that Brunson's release was the end of a legal process and not the result of a "deal." It seems likely that President Erdogan and his advisors simply opted for an end to an embarrassing and counterproductive episode. A perceived strategy of hostage taking has had the unfortunate effect of shifting a stressful diplomatic relationship to the public arena. And this shift coincides with an intense political season as the United States looks to the November midterm elections.

Three realities are likely to shape what happens next in U.S.–Turkish relations. The first reality is that the domestic conditions that led to Pastor Brunson's detention will persist. The sweeping purge that followed Turkey's failed 2016 coup may be running out of steam, but the structural consequences of widespread detentions, removals from public sector jobs, and asset seizures are likely to prove durable. A heated atmosphere of nationalism and suspicion, deterioration of the rule of law, and the virtual evaporation of independent media continue unabated. The Turkish lira may get a boost from the end of the threat of immediate sanctions. But the economy remains on the brink of a severe crisis and is highly exposed to risk in international markets. If Turkey needs IMF assistance — something many observers anticipate — backing from Washington will be essential. This is one area where the resolution of the Brunson affair will surely make a difference.

Second, unlike Europe's diverse if troubled relations with Turkey, U.S.–Turkish relations are overwhelmingly focused on security and defense. This is a brittle basis for relations between two sovereignty conscious countries, both convinced of their own exceptionalism. Andrew Brunson's release has improved the bilateral atmosphere at the top. But it may have little effect on the long list of issues clouding the relationship, not least Ankara's planned purchase of Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles. In response, Congress has blocked the transfer of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters pending a Pentagon assessment of the implications of the sale. Turkey's desire to diversify its defense purchases and to hedge against sanctions and embargoes — there is a long history of these being applied by Ankara's transatlantic partners — is an odd fit with the country's NATO ties. The mounting friction between NATO and Russia is set to impose increasingly uncomfortable choices on Turkey's leadership. And if Washington proceeds with the full implementation of primary and secondary sanctions against Iran, Turkey will be among the countries most heavily affected.

The Turks have their own list of grievances. These include the presence in Pennsylvania of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, the alleged mastermind of the 2016 coup attempt, and U.S. support for the YPG (People's Protection Units), a Kurdish militia operating in Syria. Turks are convinced that the latter are closely linked to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), with whom the Turkish government have been engaged in a running battle since the 1980s. American defense officials have been reluctant to abandon their backing for the YPG, widely seen as an effective and reliable partner in the struggle against ISIS. Most troubling, Turkish public and elite opinion is deeply suspicious of American intentions. It is an extraordinary reflection of this pervasive mistrust that many Turks are convinced Washington seeks to contain, even dismember the Turkish state. Not surprisingly, this is a perception that Moscow is pleased to encourage.

Third, the strategic environment imposes its own disciplines. This is just as true for Turkey as a regional actor as for the United States as a global power. Turkey and its transatlantic partners may have drifted far apart on the values front, and Ankara's flirtation with Moscow may irk Western strategists. Yet the prospect of sustained conflict and chaos in the Middle East, the inherent instability of Turkish–Russian relations, and the likely longer-term incompatibility of Turkish and Iranian aims give Ankara a strong stake in NATO — and predictable security ties with the United States. Of the possible Article 5 contingencies facing NATO, most are on Turkey's borders. It is striking that despite the high tension in bilateral relations, the Erdogan government still allows the United States to conduct offensive air operations from Incirlik Air Base in the southeast of the country, something Turkish governments have been loath to do since the early 1990s. Ankara may disagree with U.S. policy in Syria, but American disengagement would be even more troubling for Turkish interests. For its part, Washington needs a cooperative — and stable — Turkey, because an unstable and estranged Turkey threatens the security of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. In the wake of the Brunson affair, Washington and Ankara have their own reasons to revert to geopolitical form.

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