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Turkey ‘can end US use of base if interests hurt’

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Turkey could consider putting an end to the use of its Incirlik base by international coalition forces against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) amid a row between Ankara and Washington over U.S. relations with the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

“Incirlik is not a NATO base; everyone should know this. [The coalition forces] are there with

Turkey's permission. At this point, Turkey and the U.S. and the other coalition forces are in talks. If these talks come to a point that threatens Turkey's interests and a result cannot be reached, then Turkey will consider all options," Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Işık told Habertürk on Jan. 6.

The United States made a mistake by cooperating with the PYD in the fight against ISIL, Işık said.

"The U.S. chose the PYD as a partner in the fight with DEASH [ISIL]. From the beginning, we have been saying that this is wrong," he said.

"We are saying to our counterparts: The PYD is the Syrian wing of the PKK [the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party]," Işık said.

He also added that the U.S. would also eventually pay the price for supporting the PYD.

"The U.S. made a strategic mistake. We are paying its price as the U.S. will also pay the price. All terror organizations have made their supporters pay the price," Işık said.

Reiterating Ankara's disturbance on the U.S.' supply of arms to the PYD, Işık recalled that weapons given to Syrian Kurdish groups have subsequently been found in the hands of PKK militants in Turkey, ISIL jihadists in Syria and even on the international arms market.

"Arguing that 'the U.S. is doing this to increase terror in Turkey' would be exaggerated. We have no such evidence on it. But, at the end of the day, the U.S.' support of the PYD and supplying weapons that have been used against Turkey by the PKK obliges us to make this argument," he said.

In this respect, the anti-ISIL coalition's use of Turkey's Incirlik Air Base has come to the agenda of the public rather than the Turkish government, Işık said.

"The U.S. is our ally in NATO. The base of our alliance should be transparent and genuine. In the absence of these, it would be hard to sustain this alliance," Işık said. "This does not mean that Incirlik will be closed overnight."

While the U.S. and other countries are flying sorties against ISIL from the base, they are not providing air support to Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operation in northern Syria.

Underlining that in the event that talks with U.S. officials on these issues would not yield a result Turkey will evaluate all options, the defense minister said, "If we come to the conclusion that the presence of the anti-ISIL coalition in Incirlik has a different objective than fighting ISIL, then we'll do whatever is necessary. But it is still too early to say this."

The coalition has been using Incirlik as a launch pad in their attacks against the ISIL since mid-2015 after Ankara and Washington agreed to an understanding. The Pentagon recently hailed Turkey's agreement in opening the base to the coalition, describing Incirlik as "invaluable."

The U.S. appreciates the access provided by Turkey to İncirlik, and looks forward to that continuing, the Pentagon said Jan. 5.

“We are operating out of İncirlik ... and we look forward to that continuing,” Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook told a news briefing.

“Our people ask, ‘why are they [coalition forces] using the İncirlik Air Base [if the coalition does not provide aerial support to the Euphrates Shield operation]. We allowed not only the U.S. but also other countries’ jets to use İncirlik to jointly fight [ISIL],” Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu told state-run Anadolu Agency on Jan. 4.