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## Erdoğan, Trump hold phone call for first time .. Will there be a shift in Turkey-US ties in Trump era?

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2/8/2017

**Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. President Donald Trump held a 45-minute long phone conversation late Tuesday, their first since the American leader took office.**

In a statement, the White House said President Trump “reiterated U.S. support to Turkey as a strategic partner and a NATO ally, and welcomed Turkey’s contributions to the counter-ISIS campaign”, using another name for Daesh.

The statement added that the two countries enjoy a “close, long-standing relationship” and they have a “shared commitment to combatting terrorism in all its forms”.

According to Turkish presidential sources, President Erdoğan underlined the importance of the fight against the terrorist organization PKK and stated that the U.S. should not support its offshoots PYD/YPG.

The two leaders agreed to improve bilateral relations and to take joint action in Syria’s al-Bab and Raqqa, the source added. Future steps to be taken for economical cooperation were also discussed.

Trump also mentioned CIA Director Mike Pompeo's upcoming visit to Turkey. Pompeo is expected to consult the issues of PYD and FETÖ with Turkish officials on Thursday, which will be his first overseas visit since he took office.

The Turkish presidency also corroborated the emphasis on counter-terrorism cooperation and on the two nations' "well-established ties as friends and allies", adding that President Erdoğan wished success to President Trump during his term.

Turkey's relations with the United States under the Obama administration have been strained, with Ankara frequently expressing frustrations over U.S. reluctance to extradite the leader of the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ), whom the government accuses of orchestrating the failed July 15 military coup, despite an extradition treaty signed between the two countries. Gülen has been residing in the U.S. since 1999.

Another major disagreement between Ankara and Washington is U.S.' support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is predominantly led by the PKK terror organization's Syria offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

While the former administration in Washington argued that the SDF is the most effective "partner" of the U.S.-led anti-Daesh coalition, Turkey identifies the PYD as a terrorist organization because of the organic links the group has with the PKK, and has declared numerous times that one terror group cannot be used to eliminate another terror group.

Turkey, the U.S. and the European Union recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization. The EU and the U.S., however, do not categorize the PYD and its armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) as such, even though Turkey strongly opposes any PKK-affiliated group south of its border, both in Iraq and Syria, saying it constitutes a national security threat to its borders.

Ankara has voiced a willingness to start with a blank slate with hopes that the Trump administration will not repeat the mistakes made by the Obama one in U.S.-Turkey relations, and expects Washington to extradite Gülen and stop cooperation with the PKK terrorist organization's Syrian offshoot the PYD/YPG.

**The relationship between Turkey and the US has grown increasingly complicated since a foiled coup in Turkey in July 2016.**

President Erdogan then demanded the US hand over Gulen, whom he blamed for the coup attempt, but the Obama administration refused, asking for proof of his involvement. Though the Turkish government says a complete file on Gulen was delivered to Obama administration, yet, the Turkish religious scholar still enjoys a peaceful residence in the United States. On the contrary, Trump praised the Turkish leader's handling of the coup in an interview with the New York Times in July. "I give him great credit for being able to turn that around," he said.

**What does Turkey need from the Trump Administration?**

Turkey has two main expectations from the incoming administration of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, Turkey's foreign minister has said, naming them as the extradition of Fethullah Gülen, the alleged mastermind of the July 2016 coup attempt, and the cessation of cooperation with Syrian Kurds against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

“We believe that the new administration [of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump] will not continue the same mistakes [committed by the outgoing administration of Barack Obama]. We have two main expectations. First, the extradition of the head of FETÖ [Fethullahist Terror Organization] as soon as possible. Second, ending cooperation with the YPG [People's Protection Units], an affiliate of the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party],” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said in an address to Turkish ambassadors gathered in Ankara for an annual conference on Jan. 9.

### **Turkey takes ‘wait-and-see approach’ to Trump administration**

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is yet to react on Trump's executive order blocking US visas to individuals from seven Muslim-majority countries.

The first high-level response to break the government silence came from Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, who said the ban brings no solution to the problems, which he said are best solved by dealing with root causes.

“Regional issues cannot be solved by closing the doors on people. We expect the Western world to lighten Turkey's burden,” Yildirim said during a joint press conference with British Prime Minister Theresa May in Ankara on Jan. 28.

Numan Kurtulmus, Turkey's deputy prime minister and government spokesman, also reacted to the ban on Jan. 31 saying that the decision is “humiliating and discriminative” and that “no citizen of any country can be categorically a bad person.”The pro-government media have maintained silence and remained cautious about criticizing Trump's move, preferring to praise the new US administration.

Yet one thing is clear: NATO ally Turkey, also a member of the US-led coalition against Daesh, has political expectations as it hopes to build good relations with the new US administration after Ankara's frustration, at times, with the administration of Barack Obama.

### **Two litmus tests for US ties**

Rex Tillerson and James Mattis — the new secretary of state and secretary of defense, respectively — stressed during their congressional hearings the need for improving ties with Turkey. There are two litmus tests that will determine the trajectory of the new era in Turkey-US ties under the Trump administration.

Turkey reiterates its calls for the extradition of US-based Islamic preacher, Fethullah Gulen, who is accused by Ankara of masterminding the failed coup attempt against the Turkish government on July 15, 2016. Gulen denies he was behind it.

The backing of Syrian Kurdish militias by the US, considered by Turkey terrorist groups, is another hot topic for Ankara for the reset in ties with the new administration in Washington. It is not yet clear whether the new administration will change its policy of supporting the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), in the fight against Daesh.

Ankara is against such groups because of their close ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has launched bloody terror attacks in Turkey and been active for more than three decades.

Media reports about Trump sending heavy weapons to Syrian Kurds in their fight against Daesh, if confirmed officially, are likely to cast a shadow over the flourishing cooperation between Trump and Erdogan.

### **Turkey's 'cautious' approach**

Ahmet Han, international relations professor at Istanbul's Kadir Has University, says that Turkey has begun to act with common sense in its relations with the US due to its various domestic and foreign policy challenges.

"There are some indicators that Turkey is turning its fights into a more cautious and selective engagement policy rather than using its energy in a haphazard way and around topics that are irrelevant to its national interests," Han said.

Han noted that as far as both parties cover a certain distance in terms of Gulen's extradition case, Turkey might act in a more tolerant way in other spheres such as the relationship between the US and Syrian Kurds. "Turkey is cautious and is using a wait-and-see approach for Trump's presidency," he added.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli — who heads the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a think tank, in Ankara — said Turkish government circles publicly endorsed Trump even before he was elected. That is because Ankara hopes that, unlike Obama, Trump will act against the Gulen network in the US and stop supporting the PYD in Syria.

"This optimism, which is slowly fading, creates reluctance in Ankara to publicly criticize President Trump," Unluhisarcikli told Arab News.

However, Unluhisarcikli thinks that the US president's approach toward Muslims will poison US-Turkey relations, regardless of whether the new administration complies with the Turkish government's request regarding Gulen and the PYD.

Moreover, he added, Ankara's silence on Trump's Muslim ban will not go unnoticed in the Middle East and Europe.

### **Trump stresses 'close' relationship with Turkey in his first phone call with Erdogan**

However, US President Donald Trump reiterated US support for Turkey as a “close, long-standing” partner, during his phone call with the Turkish president on Wednesday.

Trump welcomed Turkey’s efforts in the battle against ISIS, according to a White House readout of the conversation, and spoke of both countries’ commitment to fighting terrorism “in all its forms.”

The two leaders discussed issues including a safe zone in Syria, the refugee crisis and the fight against terror, the sources said. They also said Erdogan had urged the United States not to support the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

The Turkish army and Syrian rebel groups it supports are fighting Islamic State in a separate campaign around al-Bab, northeast of the city of Aleppo. Ankara has complained in the past about a lack of U.S. support for that campaign.

### **CIA Director Pompeo’s first overseas visit to Turkey**

CIA Director Mike Pompeo, appointed by U.S. President Donald Trump, is due to pay his first overseas visit to Turkey on Thursday.

Pompeo’s visit comes after the phone conversation between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Trump on late Wednesday.

PKK’s Syrian affiliate PYD/YPG, and the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ) are expected to be the main discussion topics during Pompeo’s visit to Turkey.

It is noteworthy that Turkey’s relations with the U.S. under the Obama administration have been strained, with Ankara frequently expressing frustrations over U.S. reluctance to extradite the leader of FETÖ, and Washington’s support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is predominantly led by the PKK terror organization’s Syria offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

**In the light of US President Donald Trump’s new foreign policies, will there be a shift in the Turkey-US ties?**