



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**Tense Relations between US and Turkey – Expected Threats and Challenges for
Georgia**

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US-Turkey relations have not been so tense since 1974 when Washington imposed an arms embargo on Ankara due to its military intervention in Cyprus. The current crisis in US-Turkey relations is fundamentally different from the Cold War period situation when the two countries managed to find common ground due to the Soviet threat facing them both. It was vital for the then government of Turkey to take cover under the “security umbrella” offered by Washington.

Now, we do not have this kind of unifying threat and other different leaders are currently running Turkey. The current Turkish political elite, unlike the rulers of the previous era, thinks and talks of a multi-polar world. This is complemented with the regional wars (Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, etc.), globalization, political populism and increasing chaos in international relations (especially in the Middle East). All of these issues make the situation unpredictable.

Problematic Issues in Bilateral Relations

The main problem is that the US and Turkish political leaders and their elites have philosophies which are very much different. They perceive both the connections with other states, as well as the weight and place of their countries in international relations, in differing ways. Consequently, many problems have accumulated in US-Turkey relations over the years and resolving them has been prolonged. Their non-resolution harms bilateral relations such as, for example:



- Ankara has long been demanding the transfer of an Islamist spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, who currently resides in America, but to no avail. Turkey accuses him and his supporters of attempting the July 15, 2016 coup;¹
- Turkey also demands the release of Mehmet Hakan Atilla, Deputy Director General of the Turkish state-owned Halkbank, who is accused of conducting trade with the Islamic Republic of Iran, through the state-owned bank, in violation of US sanctions and for multiple years;²
- As one of the main challenges to its security, Turkey considers the possibility of the formation of a Kurdish state entity in Northern Syria, trying to oppose such a perspective with all available means. For this purpose, it does not shy away from either diplomatic or even direct military interventions in Syria. Ankara considers the YPG (pro-Kurdish People's Protection Units) that operates in Northern Syria to be the continuation of the PKK terrorist organization (Kurdistan Workers' Party), while for the US the YPG is one of its main allies in Syria which gives it serious military and political assistance. Ankara is futile in its demands for Washington to stop assisting the YPG;³
- In October 2016, Turkey arrested the American evangelist pastor, Andrew Brunson, on charges of abetting terrorism and having ties with Gülen's movement. Washington has long been demanding his release but with no results.⁴ These demands were especially

¹ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/710>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/turkey-halkbank-executive-detained-170329074337484.html>

³ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/710>

⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/talks-fail-to-break-impasse-on-u-s-pastor-held-in-turkey-1533782020>



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- activated for November 2018, given the mid-term elections scheduled in the United States at that time. The prisoner denies the charges. If the charges are confirmed, however, he faces up to 35 years in prison;⁵
- Other persons holding dual US and Turkish citizenships are also imprisoned in Turkey for the same charges in addition to two employees of the US Embassy (Turkish citizens) whose release is demanded by the American side;⁶
- Turkey has signed an agreement for the purchase of the S-400 Russian anti-aircraft system. The US side insists that Turkey renounce this deal as this is technically inconsistent with Western weaponry and would be impossible to incorporate into the NATO defense system;⁷

⁵ <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/135420-trampis-administraciam-turqetis-mtavrobis-or-tsarmomadgenels-sanqciebi-dautsesa>

⁶ *Sözcü*, 09.08.2018

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-foreign-usa-turkey/pompeo-presses-turkey-on-s-400-missiles-purchase-from-russia-idUSKBN1HY2A6>

- There is a high level of anti-Western sentiment in Turkish society which is reflected in the narratives of the politicians as well. Public opinion polls also confirm the high-level of anti-Western sentiments. According to a November 2017 study conducted by CAP (Center for American Progress), 73% of the Turkish population is negatively disposed towards Europe. The situation is even worse when it comes to the US with about 83% of the population negatively disposed.⁸ It is also noteworthy that anti-American sentiments are long-term and stable in the case of Turkey.⁹ Hence, it will be impossible to alter them in the short-term perspective. Consequently, it is characteristic for both the Turkish government politicians, as well as the ones from the opposition, to make sharply anti-Western (especially anti-American) statements.

Sanctions

Given the fact that an agreement could not be reached about either the exchange or the release of Pastor Brunson, the United States:

- Imposed sanctions on two Turkish Ministers on August 1, 2018.¹⁰ More specifically, the American side considers that the Minister of Interior of Turkey, Süleyman Soylu, and the Minister of Justice of Turkey, Abdulhamit Gül, played a vital role in Brunson's arrest and, hence, their properties and bank accounts (in the case of the existence of such) have been confiscated in the US, also prohibiting US citizens or companies to make transfers to them.¹¹ Despite the fact that these persons have stated that they have no properties abroad,¹² even symbolic sanctions are quite painful for Turkey;

⁸ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/02/11/445620/turkey-experiencing-new-nationalism/>

⁹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/31/the-turkish-people-dont-look-favorably-upon-the-u-s-or-any-other-country-really/>

¹⁰ *Hürriyet*, 02.08.2018

¹¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/01/politics/us-turkey-sanctions/index.html>

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-45010090>



- Fines could be imposed on the Turkish state-owned Halkbank as well as it traded with the Islamic Republic of Iran in violation of the US sanctions.¹³ Such fines and sanctions could also be imposed on other Turkish state or private organizations which plan to continue trading with Iran despite the newly imposed US sanctions.

In response to the aforementioned sanctions and pursuant to the principle of reciprocity, Turkey also imposed sanctions on two respective US officials; it also increased tariffs on the goods imported from the US and started boycotting US products (including iPhones) in general.¹⁴ However, these steps, of course, have not dealt any serious harm to the US economy.

Results of Sanctions

The US sanctions enacted against Turkey to date have more of a psychological and symbolic character.¹⁵ However, even this was enough to create serious problems in certain directions:

- Distrust and confusion on both sides has increased in US-Turkey relations;

¹³ <https://www.dw.com/tr/wsj-ba%C5%9Fka-t%C3%BCrk-liderlere-yapt%C4%B1r%C4%B1mlar-gelebilir/a-45015751>

¹⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/turkey-crisis-erdogan-vows-boycott-electronics-180814080354868.html>

¹⁵ *Cumhuriyet*, 2.08.2018

- The imposition of sanctions showed how serious the US position is and that it clearly does not plan on backing down;
- Previously existing economic problems in Turkey have deepened. For example, the annual inflation reached 17.9% in August which is the highest in the past 15 years.¹⁶ As a result, prices on almost all products and services increased in Turkey in August and September. It is expected that inflation will create multiple problems for the Turkish economy in the future as well;
- Due to the devaluation of the Turkish lira (TRY), Turkey's external debt in TRY has also grown of which USD 453 billion goes to the state while USD 245 billion is owed by the private sector;¹⁷
- The already on-going process of the outflow of investments from Turkey has quickened¹⁸ which has caused a reduction in the number of jobs. Investors sold their properties in Turkey in TRY through which they bought currency and took it abroad. This caused the demand on the foreign currency to increase which caused the growth of the exchange rate;
- The TRY exchange rate also dropped due to the expectation of increased tensions in bilateral relations in the future as well. If before the sanctions USD 1 cost TRY 4.79 the



cost of USD 1 became TRY 6.95 on August 13 which means that the Turkish national currency depreciated by about 45%;

¹⁶ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/son-dakika-agustos-ayi-enflasyon-rakamlari-aciklandi-40944582>

¹⁷ *Sözcü*, 09.08.2018

¹⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/686f156c-9a36-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d>

- Georgian citizens working legally or illegally in Turkey have also suffered from the TRY depreciation as their income in foreign currency dropped markedly.¹⁹ Consequently, they were only able to send smaller amounts of money to Georgia. As a result, GEL depreciated by about 4% with regard to foreign currencies.

The situation is further complicated by the probability of the imposition of new and stricter US sanctions about which Ankara has already been warned by Washington.²⁰

Conclusions

- The events unfolding after the beginning of the crisis have shown that tensions in US-Turkey relations are long-term and we should not expect that they will be resolved quickly;
- The tense US-Turkish relations cannot be resolved by simply freeing Pastor Brunson. His case is only the tip of the iceberg in the bilateral relations. The difficulties are much greater and require a complex approach;
- Given the very tense relations, the issues of the functioning of the İncirlik military base in Turkey or the membership of Turkey in NATO have not yet been raised. This is positive and generates hope that the situation could still be turned around;
- Parallel to Ankara's distancing itself from Washington, the level of Turkey's dependence on Russia is growing which poses a threat for Georgia;
- A confrontation between two NATO members (US and Turkey) is not in Georgia's interests. This is true especially given the fact that both of them are its strategic allies. Hence, this confrontation could negatively influence Georgia's external as well as economic security;
- In the case of the continuation of the confrontation between the US and Turkey, NATO's activities on the Black Sea could face difficulties in the future and the same goes for the already complicated and prolonged process of Georgia's NATO membership;
- In the case of continued tensions between the two countries, the imposition of new economic and military sanctions against Turkey can be expected. Given that Turkey is the top trade partner for Georgia and has a myriad of economic ties with the country, such complications will negatively influence the Georgian economy as well.

¹⁹ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sefer-levent/ev-hizmetlerinde-tlye-donus-40936579>

²⁰ <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-additional-sanctions-turkey-detained-american-pastor/4532486.html>