

The Origins and Future of the U.S.-Turkey Crisis

A Conversation with Howard Eissenstat

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*The United States and Turkey are in a **major row** over Turkey's refusal to release Andrew Brunson, an American missionary and pastor of a small church in Izmir who was arrested in October 2016 and later indicted on baseless charges of espionage, terrorism, and seeking to overthrow the Turkish government. On August 1, after negotiations over Brunson fell apart, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on the Turkish interior and justice ministers. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded by ordering the Turkish Ministry of Treasury and Finance to **impose** parallel sanctions on Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke. On August 10, tensions between the two NATO allies escalated when President Donald Trump announced that the United States would impose aluminum and steel tariffs on Turkey. Trump **wrote** on Twitter, "I have just authorized a doubling of Tariffs on Steel and Aluminum with respect to Turkey as their currency, the Turkish Lira, slides rapidly downward against our very strong Dollar! Aluminum will now be 20% and Steel 50%. Our relations with Turkey are not good at this time!" Trump's move has **exacerbated** Turkey's current economic crisis by further undermining investor confidence and an already weak currency. (The Lira has dropped in value by almost 50 percent in the past year.) Erdoğan, for his part, **described** the U.S. actions as an "economic war" against Turkey. POMED Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne posed five questions to POMED Nonresident Senior Fellow Howard Eissenstat about the crisis.*

POMED: Before you explain how relations descended to this point, can you put the current row in context? Is it unprecedented in U.S.-Turkey relations?

Howard Eissenstat: Even during the Cold War, when U.S. and Turkish strategic interests were the most closely aligned, there were periods of intense strain. In 1964, during the Cyprus crisis, President Lyndon Johnson issued what was effectively an ultimatum to Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, warning him against military action in support of Turkish Cypriots and leaving the Turkish leadership shocked and unsure of the U.S. alliance commitment to Turkey. From that point on, the possibility of finding an alternative to Turkey's alliance with the United States became an important stream within Turkish political thought. When Turkey did invade Cyprus in 1974, the United States imposed an arms embargo on Turkey that was in effect from 1975 to 1978. During the same

period, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit worked to strengthen ties with the Soviet Union. There have been more recent tensions as well, in particular around the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the U.S. **detention** of Turkish soldiers in northern Iraq that same year. There is a lot of talk about growing anti-American sentiment in Turkey today, but the United States has been **viewed** unfavorably by the majority of Turks for a very long time.

All that said, I think that this crisis is worse than previous ones. In part, this is because at a fundamental level, the two countries share fewer strategic interests today, so there is less binding them together. It is also a reflection of the extent to which President Erdoğan views the United States as an antagonistic power that aims to limit Turkey and undermine his own rule.

So how did we get into the current situation?

We are certainly dealing with two strong personalities in Trump and Erdoğan, and their similar taste for brashness and disdain for diplomatic niceties may be fueling things to a certain extent. But the crisis is a lot more complex than that, and it is important to understand the backdrop. Over the past decade or so, a long list of grievances and misunderstandings has built up on both sides. This has caused frustration and mistrust that has made it harder to communicate and resolve disputes—setting the stage for the current clash over the Brunson case.

On the American side, Ankara's support for al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria and its unwillingness to prioritize the fight against the Islamic State (IS) there has engendered much frustration. This, along with Erdoğan's advocacy for Hamas and for the Muslim Brotherhood, have suggested to many in Washington that he has an "Islamist" agenda that is at odds with American interests. Turkey's growing repression and human rights crackdown has badly tarnished U.S. views of Erdoğan, whom some U.S. officials had once seen as building a "model Muslim democracy." Violent attacks on anti-Erdoğan protestors in the streets of Washington by his security detail in **2016** and **2017** put his crackdown on vivid display and incensed U.S. lawmakers. A steady stream of anti-U.S. and anti-Western rhetoric from Turkish officials and in the Turkish media, along with Turkey's burgeoning ties with U.S. adversaries Venezuela, Iran, and Russia, have raised concerns that Turkey is moving to break with the West. The United States **sees** Turkey's plans to purchase Russian-made S-400 surface to air missiles as a threat to NATO defenses. Turkey's jailing of **U.S. citizens** and of **Turkish nationals** working at the **U.S. consulates** in Istanbul and **Adana** on what have been called "**bogus**" charges greatly angered U.S. officials and increased doubts that Turkey is a reliable partner.

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Turkey's list of grievances is also long. Bitterness over the U.S. invasion of neighboring Iraq, which Turks strongly opposed, persists 15 years later. In the Syrian civil war, Turkey was frustrated with America's unwillingness to commit to overthrowing Bashar al-Assad and to protecting civilians. Erdoğan, and indeed most Turks, have been outraged by the U.S. policy, in its anti-IS campaign, of arming the YPG, or People's Protection Units, a Syrian sister organization of the PKK, or Kurdistan Workers Party. Turkey sees the PKK as its most important strategic enemy in a decades-long conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives (the United States itself has designated the PKK a terrorist group). Turkey remains angered by what it sees as a tepid U.S. reaction to the July 2016 coup attempt. Turkish media—almost entirely under effective government control—regularly says that the United States was behind the events, and there is good reason to think that Erdoğan **believes** this as well. For him, and for many Turks, the fact that

Turkish religious scholar Fethullah Gülen, whom they believe masterminded the attempted coup, is a green-card holder living in Pennsylvania proves that the United States was involved. More broadly, Erdoğan, like much of the Turkish public, believes that the United States has often played a negative role in world affairs and seeks to constrain Turkish power in particular. For Erdoğan, the emerging conflict with the United States is not just about disputes over specific issues. It is also over Turkey's role in a multi-polar world and his desire to challenge U.S. hegemony.

What about the Brunson case, how does that fit in?

In the array of complicated issues facing U.S.-Turkish relations, the unjust detention of an American citizen presumably should have been the easiest to address, but the opposite has happened. The Brunson case instead was the spark for a crisis that has been building up for years for all the reasons that I just mentioned. That it took this particular form has a lot to do with how each country has treated the case.

The issue of Turkey's detention of American citizens and of Turkish nationals employed by the U.S. government has, understandably, loomed very large for U.S. officials. There is palpable and justifiable anger, particularly in Congress, that Turkey, a NATO ally, has been engaged in what has been called, accurately in my view, "hostage diplomacy." In other words, Turkey has attempted to use Western citizens and others it has jailed as bargaining chips to extract concessions from its Western allies. But the United States has given Brunson's case special prominence and reacted to it the most strongly, in large measure because it has mobilized the American evangelical community, a core Trump constituency.

Washington's response to the other detainees has been far weaker. For instance, the U.S. decision in October 2017 to **suspend** visa services at its diplomatic posts in Turkey was too late in coming (more than a year after some of the detentions), but was at least a step in the right direction. But then, two months later, the Trump administration suddenly **reversed** course and ended the visa suspension without its demands being met. Turks were both confused by the about-face and, not unreasonably, convinced that the United States was so desirous of smoothing over relations that hard tactics and time would result in a positive outcome for Turkey.

Let's be clear—the case against Mr. Brunson is outrageous and the United States must press hard for his release. His prosecution has all the markings of the political purge underway in Turkey: secret witnesses, hearsay, and guilt by association. The evidence against him is **Kafkaesque**, including "publishing bibles in Kurdish" and leading "a gang of Mormon teachers." Brunson faces a possible 35 years in prison.

But focusing on Brunson, and emphasizing, as President Trump has done, his standing as a "**fine Christian leader**" and a "**great Christian**"—rather than as an "unjustly detained person"—has been counterproductive. A policy aimed at freeing all the detainees, and one with clear teeth earlier, might have had better results.

Moreover, the Trump administration appears to be legitimizing Erdoğan's hostage diplomacy. There are news reports that it has **entered** into negotiations aimed at "trading" Brunson for Hakan Attıla, a Turkish banker convicted in May 2018 by a U.S. federal court in New York on Iran sanctions-

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busting charges. I don't want to comment too much on those negotiations, since many of the details have yet to emerge. But they may have reinforced Erdoğan's sense that in Brunson, he has a hostage of tremendous value, leading him to dig in. For its part, the United States has muddied the larger principle that foreign governments should not arrest its citizens and consular staff on shoddy charges and use them as political leverage. We have no business engaging in "trades" for detained Americans. It undermines basic American principles. And it undermines U.S. security because it encourages similar behavior in the future.

You are painting a picture of a relationship that could be heading toward a radical break. Was this crisis preventable?

There are three ways to answer this. First, regardless of who is leading the two countries, the relationship was likely to become more difficult due to the shifting geopolitical context. For instance, Turkey's desire to strengthen economic ties with Iran and its burgeoning relationship with Russia are based on its geography and economic realities. Erdoğan's desire for Turkey to be a great power, one that walks large on the world stage, is more intense than that of some of his predecessors, but it is an ambition that has been nurtured by many previous Turkish leaders. He, more than his predecessors, views a greater role for Turkey as inevitable and he believes that this must come, at least in part, at the expense of the United States.

Second, the way in which Erdoğan has **degraded** Turkish institutions, severely weakening judicial independence and centralizing power, *is* distinctive. It has damaged the rule of law at home and affected Turkey's ability to work with its traditional Western partners and—not incidental to the current crisis—to manage its economy. Although Turkey accrues enormous benefit from being part of NATO and from its relations with the United States and Europe, Erdoğan's highly personalized governance, disdain for institutions, and rough transactionalism have undermined his relationships with many Western countries. He has played hard ball because he is convinced that the West needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the West. But this, I think it is fair to say, is not a realistic assessment of the power balance.

Third, the United States has done a very bad job of managing the relationship. The United States has not had clear lines of communication with the Turkish government. Of course, even with better communication, the United States could not have addressed all of Turkey's concerns. Without clear evidence—which Turkey has been unable to provide—it cannot meet Ankara's demand to extradite Gülen. And the American alliance with the YPG in Syria reflected not ill will toward Turkey, but the urgency the United States placed on fighting IS and the inability of Turkey and the United States to develop a joint strategy for Syria. But the United States also has failed to demonstrate that it can be a good friend to Turkey, as well. For example, our **withdrawal** of Patriot Missile batteries from Turkey in 2015, when Turkey was worried about potential attacks from Syria and Russia, is hard to understand. At the same time, the United States has failed to respond effectively to Turkish provocations such as the detentions, to show earlier that there would be a cost to abusing the relationship. Trump's public **praise** of Erdoğan while the Brunson case and other disputes were unresolved certainly sent mixed messages. I think the Trump administration rightly has taken a tougher stance, but has done so in a way that makes it very difficult for Erdoğan to back down. It makes it hard to envision a healthy relationship going forward.

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Where do you see relations going now?

It is possible that some solution to the Brunson case will be found, and that certain parts of the relationship, in particular our military-to-military ties, which have generally continued along as normal amidst diplomatic and political tensions, will be salvaged in the medium term. But the more likely scenario is that ties will continue to sour. Having been so publicly backed into a corner by the imposition of sanctions, I believe Erdoğan will be strongly inclined to “hang tough” on Brunson and other U.S. detainees. He has already **made clear** that he plans to increase ties with Russia, China, and others, because of what he sees as American “unreliability.”

Some in Washington argue that we have already “lost” Turkey, and that the best strategy is to demonstrate the costs of angering the United States by taking measures, such as imposing sanctions, to hurt Erdoğan. This is unwise. In the current crisis, the United States is forcing Erdoğan to choose between an embarrassing capitulation or accepting significant sanctions at a moment of serious economic distress. I fear our approach is aimed more at demonstrating the power of the United States and punishing Erdoğan than at getting results.

Turkey was already heading to an economic crisis, but tough U.S. sanctions will make the situation more acute, undermining already shaky investor confidence and potentially making international loans more difficult to acquire. This approach also ensures that Erdoğan can blame the United States for economic woes that are largely of his own making.

I think we need to back up and resolve the Brunson crisis and try to re-establish a working relationship, even if it is far from a warm or close one. First, exacerbating the economic crisis in Turkey not only harms millions of innocents, but runs the risk of contagion to other economies. Second, I believe that a working relationship, particularly within the context of NATO, where Turkish officers have routinely worked with great professionalism, is still possible. Third, Turkey remains a large and strategically important country. Even without a warm relationship, and even with all of our differences, there are always going to be areas where we will need to work together.

At this point, I would argue that we need to slow down the crisis. Teddy Roosevelt once advised that we should “speak softly and carry a big stick.” We’ve demonstrated the stick. We should probably now speak more softly and give Erdoğan the capacity to back down. We have already put sanctions on the table; we should neither remove them, nor increase them for at least a few months without clear signals from Turkey. Instead, we should de-emphasize Brunson’s case, while making clear that these sanctions will remain in place until all the unjustly detained U.S. citizens and consular staff are released. Over the longer term, we may need to escalate, but we should attempt to do so in a more structured and less personalized manner. Privately, the U.S. administration should also make clear that it will support further sanctions, as **proposed** by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but give Turkey time to free the detained citizens and consular staff before moving on them. The United States expects Turkey to address its concerns regarding the S-400s, most likely through a generous deal on the purchase of Patriots or another NATO system, and to free detained American citizens and consular staff. They are relatively easy issues for Turkey to address, if it chooses to. The United States needs to make the costs and benefits clear to Erdoğan, but to do so in a way that allows him to save face. I think the United States was too slow to draw red lines and too loud when we finally did so.

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Unfortunately, my fear is that the crisis has become too big and too personalized between the two leaders to be resolved quickly or well.



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