

# The US-Turkey Crisis: The NATO Alliance Forged in 1949 Is Today Largely Irrelevant

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*There has been some reporting in the United States mass media about the deteriorating relationship between Washington and Ankara and what it might mean. Such a falling out between NATO members has not been seen since France left the alliance in 1966 and observers note that the hostility emanating from both sides suggests that far worse is to come as neither party appears prepared to moderate its current position while diplomatic exchanges have been half-hearted and designed to lead nowhere.*

The immediate cause of the breakdown is ostensibly **President Donald Trump's** demand that an American Protestant minister who has lived in Turkey for twenty-three years be released from detention. **Andrew Brunson** was arrested 21 months ago and charged with being a supporter of the alleged conspiracy behind the military coup in 2016 that sought to kill or replace **President Recep Tayyip Erdogan**.

Erdogan has asserted that the coup was directed by former political associate **Fetullah Gulen**, who lives in exile in Pennsylvania, but has produced little credible evidence to support that claim. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Erdogan has had himself voted extraordinary special powers to maintain public order [and has arrested](#) 160,000 people, including 20 Americans, who have been imprisoned. More than 170,000 civil servants, teachers, and military personnel have lost their jobs, the judiciary has been hobbled, and senior army officers have been replaced by loyalists.

Gulen is a religious leader who claims to promote a moderate brand of Islam that is compatible with western values. His power base consists of a large number of private schools that educate according to his curriculum, with particular emphasis on math and sciences. Many of the graduates become part of a loose affiliation that has sometimes been described as a cult. Gulen also owns and operates a number of media outlets, all of which have now been shut by Erdogan as part of his clamp down on the press. Turkey currently imprisons more journalists than any other country.

It is widely believed that Erdogan has been offering to release Brunson in exchange for Gulen, but President Donald Trump has instead offered only a Turkish banker currently in a U.S. prison while also turning the heat up in the belief that pressure on Turkey will force it to yield. Washington began the tit-for-tat by imposing sanctions on two cabinet-level officials in Erdogan's government: **Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu** and **Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul**. Ankara has now also been on the receiving end of [a Trump tweet](#) and tariffs have been placed on a broad range of Turkish products, to include steel and aluminum.

The view that economic pressure will force the Turks to yield could be mistaken and demonstrates that the Administration does not include anyone who knows that Americans have been unpopular in Turkey since the Gulf War. The threats from Washington might actually rally skeptical and normally pro-western Turks around Erdogan but U.S. sanctions have already hit the Turkish economy hard, with the lira having lost 40% of its value this year and continuing to sink rapidly. Foreign investors, who fueled much of Turkey's recent economic growth, have fled the market, suggesting that a collapse in credit might be on the way. Those European banks that hold Turkish debt are fearing a possible default.

It is a spectacle of one NATO member driving another NATO member's economy into the ground over a political dispute. Erdogan has responded in his autocratic fashion by condemning "interest rates" and calling for an "economic war" against the U.S., telling his supporters to unload all their liquid valuables, gold and foreign to buy the plummeting lira, a certain recipe for disaster. If they do that, they will likely lose everything.

Other contentious issues involved in the badly damaged bilateral relationship are conflicting views on what to do about Syria, where the Turks have a legitimate interest due to potential Kurdish terrorism and are seeking a buffer zone, as well as Ankara's interest in buying Russian air defense missile systems, which has prompted the U.S. to suspend sales of the new F-35 fighter. The Turks have also indicated that they have no interest in enforcing [the sanctions on Iran that were re-imposed last week](#) and they will continue to buy Iranian oil after the November 4th initiation of a U.S. ban on such purchases. The Trump Administration has warned that it will sanction any country that refuses to comply, setting the stage for a massive confrontation between Washington and Ankara involving the Turkish Central Bank.

In terms of U.S. interests, Turkey, which has the [second largest army](#) in NATO, is of strategic value because it is Muslim, countering arguments that the alliance is some kind of Christian club working to suppress Islam in the Middle East. And it is also important because of its geographic location close to hot spots where the American military is currently engaged. If the U.S. heeds Trump's call to cut back on involvement in the region, Turkey will become less valuable, but currently, access to the Incirlik Airbase, near Adana and the Syrian border, is vital.

Indeed, Incirlik has become one of the flashpoints in the argument with Washington. Last week, a [group of lawyers](#) connected politically to Erdogan initiated legal action against U.S. officers at Incirlik over claimed ties to "terrorists" linked to Gulen. The "Association for Social Justice and Aid" has called for a temporary halt to all operations at the base to permit a search for evidence. The attorneys are asking for the detention of seven named American Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels. General Joseph Votel, head of U.S. Central Command based in Germany is also cited. If the lawyers are successful in court, it will mean a major conflict as Washington asserts the rights of the officers under the Status of Forces Agreement, while Turkey will no doubt insist that the Americans are criminals and have no protection.

Another trial balloon being [floated by Erdogan](#) is even more frightening in terms of the demons that it could be unleashing. Abdurrahman Dilipak, an Islamist columnist writing in the pro-government newspaper Yeni Atik, has suggested that there might well be a second terrorist attack on the United States like 9/11. Dilipak threatened that if Trump does nothing to reduce tension "...some people will teach him [to do] that. It must be seen that if internal tensions with the United States continue like this that a September 11 is no unlikely possibility." Dilipak also warned that presumed Gulenist "U.S. collaborators" inside Turkey

would be severely punished if they dared to go out into the streets to protest in support of Washington.

If recent developments in Turkey deteriorate further it might well suggest that Donald Trump's instinct to disengage from the Middle East was the right call, though it could equally be seen as a rejection of the tactic being employed, i.e. using heavy-handed sanctions and tariffs to compel obedience from governments disinclined to follow Washington's leadership. Either way, the Turkish-American relationship is in trouble and increasingly a liability for both sides, yet another indication that the NATO alliance forged in 1949 against the Soviet Union is today largely irrelevant.

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*This article was originally published on [American Herald Tribune](#).*

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