

Trump's total capitulation to Turkey's Erdogan

The Trump-Erdogan love-in at the White House was deeply unedifying – and disturbing. The U.S. president has become the authoritarian Erdogan's sock puppet, begging the question: Why?

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After a day of meetings with U.S. President Donald Trump, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan proved what a shrewd politician he is.

He entered the eye of a hurricane of hostility directed against his domestic repression and international adventurism – and came out not only untouched, but a victor. He was hailed by Trump as "highly respected" and his "good friend," and protected by the U.S. president from any media questions that might discomfit him.

Erdogan manipulated Trump - and Trump was more than willing to be manipulated.

These days in the United States, it is hard to imagine a more despised and reviled international leader than Erdogan – except, perhaps Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman.

From nightly comedy shows, to scathing editorials, America's right and left have reached a general consensus: Erdogan is the bad guy who manipulated a seemingly willing Trump to withdraw U.S. forces in order to facilitate Turkey's invasion of northern Syria and to attack the U.S.'s staunch ally, the Kurds.

In the lead-up to his arrival in the U.S., Republican and Democrat members of Congress, led by House Foreign Affairs Chairman Eliot Engel issued a joint letter to President Trump urging him to rescind his invitation to Erdogan. The lawmakers stated that:

"President Erdogan's decision to invade northern Syria on October 9 has had disastrous consequences for U.S. national security." It continued: "Turkish forces have killed civilians and members of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a critical U.S. partner in the fight against ISIS."

There is rare bipartisan agreement, save for well-known outliers like Ilhan Omar and Rand Paul: Erdogan needs to be stopped. And the only one that

can do that, yet refuses to do so, is Trump. (Let's put aside the fact that up until two months ago, few Americans ever thought much about the Kurds, let alone felt so strongly about their well-being - or of any of the victimized groups within Syria).

With Congress's hands tied, unable to hit at Trump - who had already basically gave Erdogan a free hand to do as he wanted in Syria - the House of Representatives pulled out its biggest guns to hit at Turkey: an Armenian Genocide recognition bill. It passed almost unanimously: 405 for, just 11 against.

Americans have held formally recognizing the Armenian genocide hostage for decades, always caving into demands from Turkey to drop it: recognition, it was widely assumed, would bring relations between the two countries to a standstill. That didn't happen. Erdogan made do with summoning the U.S. ambassador to Turkey for a dressing down.

The Turkish president accused Congress of using the genocide bill to take "vengeance" for Turkey's actions in Syria. Sadly and ironically, there is a ring of truth to this, though not in the spirit that Erdogan intended (after all, Turkey categorically refutes the framing of the 1915 mass deportations and killings as genocide. During Wednesday's White House, press conference, Erdogan again suggested establishing a "historical commission" to find out what 'really' happened.)

The U.S. legislative body has had over 100 years to recognize the genocide. That they finally did so to use it as ammunition in a geopolitical slanging match with Erdogan trivializes the atrocity as just another tool of politics.

In fact, what perturbed Erdogan and his political allies was far more the *other* House bill that had passed the same day calling for sanctions against Turkey.

That bill called to end the sale of arms to Turkey for use in Syria, for sanctions on senior Turkish officials involved in the military offensive against the Kurds, and for further sanctions in response to Turkey's purchase of surface-to-air missile systems from Russia. It too passed by an enormous majority: 403-16, with Republicans supporting the measure 176-15.

Before Turkey's incursion into Syria, U.S.-Turkish tensions spiked this summer when Turkey announced its decision to purchase the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system. Officially, this should have been automatic grounds to boot Turkey out of its partnership in the F-35 fighter jet program. To add

insult to injury, Erdogan then visited Putin to check out the possibility of purchasing Russian fighter jets – and for some well-publicized bonhomie.

Rather than slapping Turkey with the automatic sanctions that, by U.S. law, kick in for countries buying the Russian missile system, Trump outraged fellow Republicans when he stated that he frankly agreed with Erdogan's decision: "I don't blame Turkey because there are a lot of circumstances and a lot of - a lot of problems that occurred during the Obama administration. This dates back to the Obama administration, which was a disaster, okay?"

After the Trump-Erdogan presser, the White House put out a mostly enthusiastic summary which did, though include this one nonchalant line hidden half-way through: "In order to achieve progress on other fronts, it is vital that we resolve the issues involving Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system, strengthening our defense partnership." No specific pathway to do that was mentioned.

But with Trump so wedded to finding workarounds for his increasingly close pal Erdogan, the actual imposition of sanctions, whether in the wake of Turkey's Syria invasion or its S-400 purchase, will stall at the president's door. He still has to sign off on them. And if Wednesday's performance tells us anything, then it's that a self-declared "big fan" of Erdogan won't be signing anything.

The two key Republicans leading the anti-Erdogan, pro-Kurdish push, Lindsey Graham and Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, have also both realized there was no point taking the House bills to the GOP-dominated Senate, because of the domestic damage it would do to the president.

Whereas Senator Graham stayed on the warpath – pushing a bill for more punitive sanctions that include cutting off U.S. military assistance to Turkey - and even banning Erdogan from entering the U.S., McConnell has cycled back a bit.

After the House vote, he declared: "We need to think extremely carefully before we employ the same tools against a democratic NATO ally that we would against the worst rogue states."

The highly unusual tete-a-tete that Trump stage-managed Wednesday, for Erdogan to meet a core group of Republican senators, was perhaps intended to lower the temperature and even find common ground.

But Sen Graham did not hide his disgust: sitting with his back partially towards Erdogan he stated, pointedly, that the meeting's purpose was "to have an American civics lesson for our friends in Turkey." He followed up with a veiled insult: the punchline from Ronald Reagan's favorite joke: "There's a pony in there somewhere." It refers to an optimistic farmboy searching for a pony in a pile of manure.

But no matter senior GOP politicians' repulsion, it wasn't Trump who read the lesson to Turkey's president, it was Erdogan who schooled Trump. And Trump completely capitulated.

There was not one single moment in front of the cameras where the U.S. president even whispered a comment critical of Erdogan. He wholeheartedly accepted Erdogan's statement that "[W]e [in Turkey] have no problems with the Kurds, we have problems with terrorists," then making the strikingly naïve statement that Erdogan "has a greatly relationship with the Kurds."

Trump completely bought into Erdogan's plan to repatriate two million Syrians into a buffer zone on Syrian territory in a Kurdish-majority area - part of the ethnic cleansing his critics claim he is executing - without recognizing that the U.S. no longer has the last word there, but Syria and Russia.

Trump didn't blink when Erdogan launched a tirade against the "terrorist" Gulen movement and its leader, Fethullah Gulen, self-exiled in the U.S., and warned he would be sending Trump incriminating materials on them - part of a long campaign for the U.S. to extradite Gulen, in which there has already been considerable under-the-table involvement by Trump administration officials and advisors.

There was no mention of an uncomfortable issue for Erdogan: the fate of Halkbank, the Turkish state bank, currently under U.S. indictment for violating sanctions against Iran.

Erdogan got what he wanted. He shored up relations with the U.S. president without giving anything up at all.

The two applauded each other on their joint aspiration to increase bilateral trade from \$20 billion to \$100 billion. Erdogan is probably hoping he can duplicate the two-track relationship he has with Israel: to let money be money, and politics be politics. Bombastic political relations, but uninterrupted trade.

But what was most ironic, painfully so, was when Trump actually paid tribute to Erdogan's own authoritarian playbook - in his presence, in the White House.

When Trump chose a Turkish reporter to ask a question, he demanded that it be "a friendly reporter from Turkey, only a friendly reporter please." As Sen Graham remarked dryly to a reporter, "There aren't any others left."

Unsurprisingly, he picked a staunchly pro-Erdogan reporter. Jokingly, he commented to her after her all-too-friendly question: "Are you sure you don't work for Turkey?"

After today's unedifying and indiscriminate love-in, the question we should perhaps be asking is whether the U.S. president himself is working for Turkey. And if so, why.

Louis Fishman is an assistant professor at Brooklyn College who divides his time between Turkey, the U.S. and Israel, and writes about Turkish and Israeli-Palestinian affairs. Twitter: @Istanbultelaviv