

Rex Tillerson in Turkey: What to expect from the U.S. secretary of state's visit to Ankara



It will be a short meeting with long wish lists and an even longer list of potential consequences.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is in Ankara today for his first official visit with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu.

- **U.S. secretary of state says there's 'no space' between Turkey, U.S. in determination to defeat ISIS**

The United States and Turkey, NATO allies, have a long history and an important friendship – but the love is hardly unconditional. This meeting will be one of a series that will help determine the conditions of the relationship in the future. Whether it thrives or dies will have serious implications for both countries.

What Turkey wants

Turkey has two key asks. One is the return of Ankara's most wanted man: Fethullah Gulen. The other is a plan to fight ISIS that doesn't involve the PYD and YPG – Kurdish groups that the

Turkish government refers to as terrorists.

Raqqa is a key battleground in Syria, and many argue the PYD and YPG are crucial to getting ISIS out of the region. But Turkey is adamant its troops will not be involved if those Kurdish groups are.

Their presence, the Turkish government insists, will change the ethnic makeup of the region and pose a future threat to Turkey.

Turkey's prime minister made a surprise announcement Wednesday night, saying that Operations Euphrates Shield – the major Turkish operation in Syria – was finished. Binali Yildirim told Turkish news network NTV the operation was “successful” and because of it, Turkish troops were able to cleanse the towns of Jarabulus and Al Bab of ISIS.

The timing is interesting, given the Tillerson visit and that Turkish officials have been saying for some time they were planning to move towards Manbij next. That plan is apparently on hold.

Beyond ISIS and some Kurdish groups, the Turkish government also sees a significant threat in Gulen. Though he has lived for years in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, Turkey blames the cleric for the failed but deadly coup attempt that stunned Turkey last July.

• Who is Fethullah Gulen, the man Erdogan blames for Turkey's coup attempt?

The Tayyip Erdogan government has labelled Gulen and his supporters FETO – The Fethullah Gulen Terror Organization – and has demanded his extradition. It insists that it has delivered files full of evidence to the U.S. to support the request.

Gulen, a former Erdogan ally turned critic, has denied any

involvement but acknowledged that people sympathetic to his movement may have been among the plotters.

While Turkey is putting a lot of hope in the new Trump administration, it is U.S. courts that will decide if Gulen comes back to Turkey, said Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, the Ankara director of the public policy organization, the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

And those courts, he added, will want proof.

“There’s circumstantial evidence of a Gulenist conspiracy,” he said. “On the other hand, the courts in the United States will look for direct evidence.

“It’s one thing to be persuasive about this issue, but it’s another thing to be able to present direct evidence.”

Extradition cases are usually long, drawn-out affairs, so Gulen’s fate will not be decided in the short time Cavusoglu and Tillerson have to talk. These kinds of cases can take years – not weeks – to be resolved, Unluhisarcikli said.

Bizarre developments

There are allegations that some U.S. officials may have been trying to give Erdogan what he wants – even if it meant breaking the law.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, former CIA director James Woolsey said he was privy to a conversation in which former national security adviser Michael Flynn – once a lobbyist paid by the Turkish government – was “brainstorming” with high-level Turkish officials about a potential “covert operation” to get Gulen out of the U.S.

Flynn’s spokesman denies that any such discussions took place. (Flynn resigned from his post after it was revealed he had not disclosed conversations with the Russian ambassador to the

U.S.)

▪ White House says it didn't know Michael Flynn lobbied for Turkey

The Woolsey interview is just one in a recent series of mysterious developments in the Turkey-U.S. relationship.

Preet Bharara, the former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, has recently become a bit of a celebrity in Turkey. Before he was fired by the Trump administration, Bharara was prosecuting Turkey-based businessman Reza Zarrab on charges of funnelling money to Iran, in violation of U.S. sanctions.

Zarrab was also named in a 2013 bribery and corruption investigation linked to high-ranking officials in the Erdogan government, though the probe was eventually dropped.

Now Rudy Giuliani, an ally of U.S. President Donald Trump, has been added to Zarrab's defence team. And on Tuesday, a top executive with Turkey's state-run Halkbank was arrested in New York, accused of colluding with Zarrab.

Turkey's foreign minister says that arrest and "ensuring a transparent process" in the case is now on the agenda for his talk with Tillerson.

Then there's the recent electronics ban that affects, among others, Istanbul's main airport, and the new travel warning from the State Department, which asks U.S. citizens to avoid southeast Turkey "due to the persistent threat of terrorism."

Despite coming days before Tillerson's visit, Unluhisarcikli believes these alerts are not calculated moves intended to send a message to the Turkish leadership. "Coincidences are more probable than we tend to believe," he said.

What is definitely not a coincidence, but rather clear sign of strategy to keep relations with the U.S. in good standing – at

least for now – is how relatively silent the Turkish government has been in the face of the recent arrests and bans.

Erdogan and his ministers have railed against European leaders for other perceived slights.

What the U.S. needs

Turkey isn't the only one who needs to keep this partnership going; the U.S. also needs an ally in the region.

Turkey has always offered that, and the use of its Incirlik Air Base, to the Americans. But as Erdogan's power has increased, so too have the fractures in the relationship.

The U.S. needs Turkey to be on board with its plan in Raqqa, and Tillerson is expected to again push for the idea of an anti-ISIS strategy that uses Kurdish fighters.

And Tillerson isn't likely to focus on Turkey's upcoming referendum that could expand Erdogan's powers even further, save for perhaps a reference to the importance of democracy. Tillerson will not be meeting with any opposition leaders.

Cavusoglu and Tillerson will hold a joint news conference after their meeting on Thursday afternoon, when many will be paying close attention to their words and body language.

The importance of the two countries' relationship cannot be overstated, Unluhisarcikli said. The more Turkey drifts away from the West, the more it drifts into the liability category, making an already unstable region even riskier.

"What Turkey turns into will determine whether Turkey is an asset or a liability for transatlantic community."