

NATO Summit: Trump's Embrace of Erdoğan Reaches New Heights

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President Donald Trump's long-perplexing bromance with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan entered the realm of the surreal during last week's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Ankara. Trump did not confine himself to his usual effusions regarding Erdoğan ("[great man](#)," "[excellent ally](#)," "[strong leader](#)," etc.). Rather, he defied logic in implying that Turkey was the best U.S. ally in the Iran war, and he rewrote history regarding other matters, in the service of trying to elevate Erdoğan's stature, for unclear returns.

Iran War: Friend or Foe?

Media deemed Trump's announcements that he is "considering" selling F-35s to Turkey and that he intends to lift sanctions on Turkey as the most noteworthy news to emerge from the U.S.-Turkish bilateral dimension of Trump's Ankara visit. In fact, the former announcement was unsurprising—and, from the Turkish perspective, disappointingly hedged—and the latter unrealizable, unless Congress agrees or unless Turkey removes the cause of the sanctions by ridding itself of the S-400 air-defense system Ankara purchased from Russia in 2017. Beyond the issues of F-35 sales and sanctions removal, however, the visit highlighted Trump's ever-tighter embrace of Turkey's authoritarian leader.

Upon arrival in Ankara, Trump once more berated U.S. allies, as he had for weeks, for not supporting his war against Iran—a war about which they hadn't been consulted or even informed prior to initiation of hostilities. However, Trump [praised](#) Turkey as "much more loyal than other countries that we [would] think would be loyal." Specifically—and oddly—he [saluted](#) Erdoğan for setting aside his hostility towards Israel and not joining "the other side," i.e., Iran, during the war. He elaborated with the preposterous claim that Turkey had considered jumping in on Iran's side during the war—almost certainly untrue—but that he, Trump, had urged Erdoğan not to and the latter graciously acceded to Trump's request.

If the other allies had sinned in Trump's eyes by not joining the war on the U.S. side, it defies reason that Erdoğan merits praise simply for not joining the Iranian side. Trump apparently has a double standard—one standard for Turkey and another for the rest of the allies. But the irony is even richer than that.

Erdoğan not only didn't join the U.S. side in the war, but he actively opposed the war, which he termed "[unlawful](#)." On the first day of the war, Turkey [announced](#) that it would not allow its airspace or other "assets," such as bases, to be used "for operational purposes." Ankara subsequently denied a report that the United States had requested such use; Washington did not comment. Whether or not such a request was made, there is little doubt—given Turkey's 330-mile border with Iran—that the United States would have found use of Turkish airspace and bases militarily advantageous.

To a certain extent, it's understandable for multiple reasons that Turkey would want to stay out of a war on its very border and seek instead to put itself forward as a mediator. On the other hand, the United States did use bases "for operational purposes" in several allied Gulf states that are even more vulnerable than Turkey.

Thus, from the standpoint of support for the U.S. effort against Iran, Turkey would seem to be not the U.S.'s best ally but rather one of its *worst*. (Spain, which used [rhetoric](#) about the war similar to Turkey's but perhaps more persistently and pointedly and explicitly [closed its airspace](#) to U.S. military aircraft, might have been worse, though, unlike Turkey, it did not have to rely on NATO air defenses to [protect its territory](#) from Iranian missiles.)

Revisiting the Brunson Imbroglio

Illustrating Erdoğan's responsiveness as an ally, Trump also [praised](#) Erdoğan for releasing Pastor Andrew Brunson from prison in 2019—not only a total distortion of history but a history Trump should remember well because it occurred during his first term and Trump himself was intimately involved in it.

A little actual history: Brunson, an evangelical pastor who [had lived](#) in Turkey for 23 years, was suddenly arrested in 2016 on what seems to have been completely spurious allegations, charged with espionage and supporting Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorism as well as Turkey's failed 2016 coup. The arrest occurred at a time when Erdoğan was intensely [pressing](#) the United States to extradite Muslim Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen, a U.S. permanent resident whom Erdoğan accused of being the mastermind of the failed coup. Erdoğan, who dominates Turkey's judicial system, tipped his hand as to why Brunson had been arrested. "You have a pastor [Gülen]. You give us that one and we'll work with our judiciary and give back yours [Brunson]," he [said](#) brazenly at the time. In effect, Erdoğan was acknowledging that Brunson was a hostage.

Trump let Brunson languish in jail with minimal protest for nearly two years until members of Trump's evangelical base began to complain vigorously. That finally spurred Trump to action. He publicly demanded Brunson's release and, when Erdoğan didn't acquiesce, Trump [slapped](#) sanctions on Turkey. The sanctions were tough—a doubling of tariffs on key Turkish exports, steel and aluminum—and they set off a downward spiral of the Turkish lira that arguably was the initial cause of the currency's current, ongoing descent.

After three months, Erdoğan caved in to the economic pressure and [released](#) Brunson. Rather than the magnanimous hero of Brunson's freedom—as Trump portrayed him last week—Erdoğan effectively was Brunson's kidnapper and jailer who liberated his prisoner only when Trump himself imposed excruciating sanctions. In claiming that Erdoğan had generously released Brunson immediately upon Trump's request, Trump was rewriting history in order to cast his "dear friend" in the best possible light.

No Sanctioning Friends?

Ironic also was Trump's statement, in suggesting that he wanted to lift sanctions on Turkey, [because](#) "(w)e don't want to sanction friends." During his first term, Trump sanctioned Turkey three times: in 2018, for the aforementioned Brunson arrest; in 2019, briefly, when he warned that he [could](#) "destroy and obliterate" Turkey's economy if it did not halt its invasion of northern Syria; and in December 2020, with congressionally mandated but presidentially [imposed](#) sanctions under the Counter-

ing America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), in response to Turkey's purchase of S-400s from Russia. In addition, he [suspended](#) non-immigrant visa services for Turks for nearly three months in 2017 in response to the house arrest of two Turkish citizens employed by U.S. diplomatic posts in Turkey.

To my knowledge, no other president has imposed sanctions on Turkey even once. The 1975-78 arms embargo of Turkey was [mandated](#) by Congress and opposed by the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter administrations.

Notwithstanding the sanctions he imposed, it would be misleading to suggest that Trump was other than supportive of Erdoğan and Turkey during his first term. Exploiting loopholes in the legislation, he avoided imposing CAATSA sanctions on Turkey until Congress passed a law requiring it as the administration was on its way out the door. And he frequently praised Erdoğan from the earliest days of his administration; reportedly few, if any, world leaders enjoyed the regular telephone access to Trump that Erdoğan did.

Trump 2.0

Yet, as his recent visit to Ankara punctuates, Trump has been much stronger in his support for Erdoğan in his second term. His second term has not been marked by the sanctions and threats that sometimes marred U.S.-Turkish relations in his first term. In fact, there has been no noteworthy criticism of Turkey whatsoever during Trump's second term.

Most notably, this year Trump's Justice Department [dropped](#) its case against the Turkish state-owned Halkbank, which had been charged with circumventing U.S. sanctions against Iran—a charge that had led to billions in fines against other European banks, in every case for lesser offenses than those attributed to Halkbank. Reportedly, the case was dropped in exchange for Turkey's pressure on Hamas to help bring about the cease-fire and final release of Israeli hostages in October.

Ulterior Motive?

From time to time, Trump's embrace of Erdoğan, so out of step with that even of most of Turkey's supporters in Congress, has aroused suspicion. In 2019, after leaving the White House, John Bolton was [reported](#) to have told an investor dinner that Trump's policy toward Turkey could only be explained by a self-interested business relationship. In 2015, Trump himself reportedly [acknowledged](#) potentially "a little conflict of interest" regarding Turkey due to the "tremendously successful" licensing arrangement the Trump Organization has on Trump Towers Istanbul, an office/residential/mall complex that still exists. On July 10 this year – just after the NATO summit—ten Democratic Congressmen [sent a letter](#) to President Trump that, in effect, questioned whether Trump, his son Donald Jr., and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Tom Barrack are privately profiting from their relationships with Turkey and Erdoğan.

To say that Trump over-praised Erdoğan during his Ankara visit is not to denigrate the effective role Erdoğan played in staging a positive summit. Trump attributed his very attendance to the fact that his friend Erdoğan was hosting. And it is reasonable to speculate that Erdoğan may have played a positive role in convincing Trump to support a relatively unified summit that, inter alia, reaffirmed Article 5 and supported Ukraine, while avoiding a Trump tantrum that would place NATO's immediate future in doubt.

Nor is it to suggest that there are not sound strategic reasons for the United States to cultivate strong ties with Turkey. The main reasons are well-known: Turkey's location, its army (NATO's second largest), and its status as NATO's only major Muslim-majority member (Albania being the only other Muslim-majority member).

It is, however, to suggest that Trump's unusual level of support for Erdoğan—support to the extent that he praises Erdoğan for the very actions that incur his wrath toward other allies, that he transparently distorts history in order to praise Erdoğan, that he never criticizes Erdoğan's vituperative rhetoric and oppositional policies toward U.S. ally Israel (such as blocking Israel's participation in NATO activities) or his disturbing record on human rights (which, in fairness, is not a concern of Trump's anywhere)—still merits thought and begs explanation.