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THE CURRENT: What did the Trump-Erdoğan meeting accomplish?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

On Wednesday, President Trump and Turkey's President Erdoğan met at the White House in what was billed as something of a fence-mender following Turkey's push into northern Syria against Kurdish forces who had been US allies in the fight against ISIS.

With us today to discuss the outcomes from that meeting is Amanda Sloat, Robert Bosch Senior Fellow in our Center on the United States and Europe. Amanda, thanks for being here.

SLOAT: Thanks for having me.

PITA: The presidents were also joined by a group of Republican Senators. Amanda, what did the involved parties hope would come out of this and what do we know about the actual outcomes of these meetings? I should say for our listeners that we're recording this Weds night, shortly following the end of the press conference, but you're listening to this on Thursday, so that's where we're at.

SLOAT: Yes, so everybody listening on Thursday may know even more than we know right now. As of now, it does not appear that much of anything came out of this meeting. Certainly it doesn't seem like any damage was done; there was dialogue between all sides, there was continued pledges of further dialogue, but it doesn't appear that there were any major breakthrough on the key issues that were concerning the two sides.

There were two issues that both the Americans and the Turks were preoccupied with coming into this meeting. The first had to do with the situation in Syria: President Trump suggested that the cease-fire was holding; he praised Vice President Pence for having negotiated it. Many saw this invitation to Erdoğan to come to the White House as a reward for having implemented this cease fire. So, there seems to have been some discussion around where things stand in Syria.

From Erdoğan's perspective, he was likely going to be pushing a number of things related to his continued agenda in Syria. One, he was continuing to talk about the ISIS prisoners and steps that he was taking to round up some of the prisoners that had escaped, as well as some of the action that he had taken against ISIS figures that were captured within Turkey and within areas in Syria that Turkey controlled.

Second, he was expressing his great concern about rumors that Trump seemed to have fueled with his own tweets about the possibility that the head of the YPG force, known as General Mazloum, was going to be invited to the White House. Erdoğan sees him as a terrorist, he suggested that he gave over documents suggesting that was the case. Turkey has issued a red notice through Interpol, and certainly

for Erdoğan, it would be seen as very politically embarrassing for the United States to be hosting Mazloum.

When a Turkish journalist asked Trump about this in the press conference, Trump deflected on that question, he diverted to his famous, “we’ll see what happens” answer, but then repeated that he thought things were going very well, and progress was being made on both sides.

The other big issue that they were going to be discussing was Turkey’s purchase of his Russian S400 missile defense system, and the American desire to get Turkey not to move forward with using that system. So far, the United States has kicked Turkey out of the F-35 stealth fighter jet program. Trump is still keen to sell F-35s to Turkey. Congress is very interested in this issue because they had passed CAATSA sanctions that were imposed on Russia after it interfered in the 2016 elections, tried to persuade countries not to purchase these systems, and so Congress wants to see the Trump administration impose these sanctions on Turkey. So that certainly is going to be an issue the senators are likely to have discussed with Trump and Erdoğan as well.

PITA: Have we heard anything yet from the members of Congress about how they feel the talks went?

SLOAT: No, so far, it’s been very unclear. The press conference happened right after that meeting, and I think frankly all of Twitter and most of the news networks here were focused on the impeachment hearings that were happening on the House side. But it will be very interesting to see what these senators’ reactions to this is. Certainly Trump is going to need the support of Congress and particularly the Senate. You’ll recall that a couple weeks ago the House passed sanctions on Turkey as a result of the Syria incursion. It also passed the Armenian genocide resolution, both of which Erdoğan reacted negatively to, so there’s going to be interest in whether or not the senate passes the same package of sanctions and what that means. There’s questions for Trump as to whether or not the Senate continues to push him to implement these CAATSA sanctions. And if Trump wants to go forward and continue to encourage Turkey to purchase the Patriot missile system instead, and to come back into the F-35 program, it’s also going to need congressional approval for those things to happen. Clearly Trump was trying to mediate between Erdoğan and some of the Republican senators that had been quite critical.

PITA: Can you talk a little bit about Turkey’s current relationship with the EU I understand the EU recently put new sanctions on Turkey. In return Erdoğan has threatened – currently Turkey is holding many of the refugees from various Middle East crises, keeping them from going into Europe – he’s threatened to “open the gates” I think was his phrase, as well as more firmly repatriate ISIS detainees. Can you talk about that?

SLOAT: Sure, so in the same way that US-Turkey relations have been frayed, EU-Turkey relations have also been facing difficulties in recent years. There’s two sets of sanctions that you rightly noted that the EU recently imposed. A couple of weeks ago, the European Union took a decision to stop arms sales to Turkey in response to its incursion into Syria. This past week, a further decision was taken by the EU to impose economic sanctions on Turkey for its decision to drill off the coast of Cyprus, an action that is seen as very provocative to the Cypriots. Thus far, the EU has agreed on a legal framework for a travel ban and an asset freeze with the idea that they would fill in the names of the individuals to be sanctioned at a later stage. So we have two sets of sanctions from the EU on Turkey right now. At the same time, Erdoğan has threatened to retaliate against Europe, and there’s two main cards that Erdoğan is looking to play. The first has to do with the situation of refugees. I think Turkey certainly deserves a large amount of credit for what it has done in hosting over four million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Not surprisingly the European Union does not want these refugees flooding into Europe. We saw that happen in 2015 and it ended up causing great challenges for the European Union. So for right now we have a fairly loose agreement that is holding whereby these refugees largely stay in Turkey and the European Union provides financial assistance to help with the refugees. But Erdoğan continues to use this as a threat to the European Union.

The second issue that Erdoğan brought up is the question of the ISIS prisoners, the foreign fighters. Over the last couple of years of the conflict in Syria, a number of ISIS fighters have been captured on the battlefield. To date, they were held by the YPG fighters. As part of Turkey's incursion into Syria, there was questions about what was going to happen with these ISIS prisoners. The YPG is still looking after a number of them; Turkey also appears to have custody of some of them. Estimate suggest there's some 11 thousand foreign fighters, and numbers suggest around two thousand of those are European, with the rest being predominantly Iraqi and Syrian. What Erdoğan is suggesting is that European countries need to take their foreign fighters back and be responsible for their own nationals. To date, the Europeans have not wanted to do that, and some European countries have unhelpfully removed the citizenship from these foreign fighters, leaving them stateless. And so Erdoğan, again, is threatening that he's going to start extraditing these fighters back to European countries and forcing them to take responsibility for these prisoners.

PITA: Can you speak about what these means for the trilateral relationship between the US and Turkey and also Europe, particularly as it concerns NATO. Last month, in an interview with the Economist, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke in shockingly frank terms of how he sees the current state of NATO as a functioning security alliance. Can you speak about how this is relating there?

SLOAT: Leaders of the NATO alliance are scheduled to meet on December 3 and 4 in London as a celebration of the alliance's big anniversary this year. Given everything that's happening, it'll be a particularly interesting conversation. We have French President Macron who, as you said, called NATO "brain-dead," which is something that a lot of people took issue to and Trump actually made reference to that in his opening press conference with Erdoğan, although interestingly suggesting Erdoğan was the one who had problems with it, and not expressing so much unhappiness himself with that. We have Erdoğan, who will be at this meeting, and as we've been discussing there's a lot of frustration that European leaders have with Erdoğan at the moment. And then we also have Trump there, who can be very unpredictable in the way he conducts himself at these summits. In particular, this summit is going to be happening in London a week before the general election there. Trump has weighed in in the past on British elections, so it is very possible that he'll make remarks in London related to the election that could either be helpful or harmful for Boris Johnson in the wake of those polls. So I think it'll certainly be worth watching what happens in London that first week in December, because there's a lot of issues that are really churning within the NATO relationship right now.

PITA: Amanda, thanks for being here and talking about this.