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Turkish-American tension: Limits and consequences

Dr. Said Elhaj

The recent tension between Ankara and Washington is reportedly continuing after the United States Embassy in Ankara suspended nonimmigrant visa services at its diplomatic facilities in Turkey, prompting Ankara to respond in kind and halt visa services in the United States - following the arrest of a Turkish employee at the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul - Metin Topuz - and summoning another for investigations on charges related to Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization (FETO), led by U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom the Turkish government accuses of orchestrating last year's failed coup.

The Turkish authorities arrested Metin Topuz a few days ago (Sunday, Oct. 8) for investigations, and summoned another - referred to by the initials N.M.C. on Monday Oct. 9. Turkish media have leaked evidence that seems was behind Topuz's arrest, most importantly his frequent contacts with the judges and security directors who arranged corruption cases in late 2013 - later called "a judicial coup against the government". Topuz was also reportedly accused having contacts with a group of officers that were involved in the failed 2016 coup attempt.

In interpretation of the American anger, there are two possibilities:

1- That Washington has considered this procedure an insult to the United States, as employees at its embassies and consulates should enjoy some kind of implicit immunity, or

2- That these two employees - either in person or through their relations - were crucial to communicating with FETO, which obviously has close ties with the United States.

In my view, there is some exaggeration in describing the situation as an unprecedented crisis in the Turkish-American bilateral relations. In fact, the current tension cannot be compared with the Cuban missile crisis (1962), President Johnson's letter to Turkish Prime Minister (1964), the U.S. ban on arms sales to Turkey after its intervention in



Cyprus (1974), or the crisis of the Turkish parliament's denial of Washington's request to deploy U.S. troops through Turkish territory for attacking Baghdad during its invasion of Iraq (2003). However, we can say that this crisis is different from its predecessors, as it is a diplomatic one par excellence. Though it has moved from statements to actions, but it is still not an unprecedented or insoluble crises.

Also, there is a need to put this crisis / tension in context: It is not a surprise move, but it is only a new manifestation of the tension curve in Turkish-West (Both European and American) relations. In recent years, there has been a remarkable deterioration in the Turkish-American relations for several reasons, most notably the continued American support to the Kurdish armed factions in Syria (ignoring Ankara's reservations), Washington's procrastination in the extradition of Fethullah Gulen – who lives in Pennsylvania – as well as the divergence of the two countries' views on a number of regional issues.

It seems to me that the whole matter is related to the shift in the level of relations between Ankara and Washington, especially after the important changes that have taken place in Turkey over the past 15 years with the Justice and Development Party (AK Party). Among these changes is the development in Turkey's views on its status and role, which Washington does not want to understand or recognize. Definitely, Turkey is no longer just an advanced NATO base as it used to be during the Cold War, nor it is the 'strategic ally' that was declared in 1995, nor the 'ideal ally' as Obama described it in 2009.

Where is the crisis going?

Well, there are important signs that should not be overlooked, namely, that the two parties do not want a no-ceiling escalation of this tension though they were keen on sending messages and confirming their positions. An example of this appeared in the Turkish president's attempt to restrict the tension to the (former) U.S. ambassador in Ankara, John Bass, in spite of the U.S. State Department's response in this regard. Also, the Pentagon said the crisis between the two countries was "diplomatic" and would not affect their military and security cooperation in the face of "terrorism". Moreover,



some measures have already been taken to ease tension, which indicates that there is a desire to contain the crisis, such as the defendant's meeting with his lawyer last Friday (Oct. 12).

Therefore, it is expected that the two countries will contain this limited crisis in a way that preserves their faces. Diplomats on both sides are able, in my opinion, to crystallize a course that could be accepted by politicians in the future. It is useful here to note that what caused events to take this course was their coincidence with the U.S. ambassador's end of his term of service in Ankara. This means that the appointment of a new ambassador may require some time; but at the same time it could introduce an acceptable solution for the crisis.

However, the two sides' unexpected moves indicate that their deteriorating relations are not likely to be normalized or improved soon. The aforementioned reasons for the decline in the two countries' bilateral relations are still existing, effective and sustainable in the absence of any major surprises. So I expect that the relations between Ankara and Washington will continue to deteriorate, but gradually and slowly, without necessarily entering a stage of an extremely deep crisis or a direct public confrontation.

This is what motivates Turkey to continue development of its relations with Eastern countries, particularly Russia, to achieve balance and flexibility in its foreign policy in light of successive and simultaneous crises. It is also noteworthy that Turkey still needs to crystallize a new vision for its foreign policy that should commensurate with its status and role, and at the same time take into consideration the ever-changing regional and international circumstances.⁽¹⁾

¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of EIPSS.