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## US & Turkey: discouraging signals

Dr. Said Elhaj

The Sochi summit seems to have annoyed the United States. Only two days after the trilateral talks (Putin-Erdogan-Rouhani) at the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, Trump phoned Erdogan for discussing "the problems he inherited in the region," as he used to say.

Of course, Washington would not be pleased if there was a solution in Syria in the absence of the United States (despite the U.S.-Russia understandings in the end). Also, the United States does not desire to see Turkey, the NATO member and its strategic partner since 1995, closer to Moscow than to Washington. In fact, one of the most important reasons for this variable is the American policies that disturb Turkey, especially concerning the Kurdish file in Syria.

Following the telephone call between Trump and Erdogan, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that Trump pledged to stop arming Kurdish armed organizations in Syria.

After this statement as well as recalling the U.S. position toward the Kurdistan Region referendum, some observers expected that Washington will dispense with the Kurds of Syria as it did with their counterparts in Iraq after using them in the confrontation with ISIS – for containing Turkey.

However, the stance of the United States towards the referendum had nothing to do with containing Turkey, as Washington was not against the Kurdistan Region referendum or the region's secession. In fact, the US only had reservations on the timing which was believed to have a negative impact on the US fight against "terrorism." Although Ankara has achieved its main goal, yet it is certainly not pleased with its tactical losses due to subsequent developments. Also, Turkey does not trust the U.S. position on the long run.

The US support of the Syrian Kurd's Democratic Union Party (PYD) and provision of military arms with various types of weapons to PYD, including qualitative and heavy weapons – that Turkey regards as a threat to its national security – does not seem to have changed so much. Several statements were made by the Pentagon and the White House spokeswoman, confirming the continuation of this support, although some

spoke about the "possibility" to reduce and control it; and others talked about the intention to restore it in the future.

Thus, it seems that such comments are linked to the ISIS imminent military defeat which could be followed by restructuring, positioning and deployment of troops in an attempt to curb the Turkish-Russian cooperation, particularly in Syria. It is noteworthy that there are differences in views between Trump and various American institutions. There seems to be a little change in the American vision regarding the Syrian issue and the whole region, particularly the US relations with Turkey. In fact, the US has at least ten military bases in northern Syria that protect the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which seizes almost a third of Syrian territory while the Kurds represent only 8.5% of the Syrian population. This clearly means that the US administration is pushing towards scenarios of division and federalism, amid a clear commitment to alliance with PYD and its military arms in the near and medium ranges; although these organizations (PYD, YPG, SDF, and PKK) are classified by Turkey as terrorist organizations.

Ankara's problem with the political project for creating a mini-state on its southern border seems so much complicated, as Russia, also, does not support Turkey's view. Furthermore, Russia even does not classify the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization (unlike the United States and the European Union). Also, Russia deals with the PKK and the PYD normally and it even allowed the latter to open a representative office in Moscow. Russia is still insisting on involving PYD in the Astana talks and the Syrian National Dialogue Conference which will be held in Sochi.

However, Ankara seems able - at least at present - to control Russia's position towards the Kurdish file, imposing its vision; unlike the US administration, which seems to be indifferent to the concerns of its strategic partner and the requirements of Turkey's national security.

Therefore, the US position towards the Kurdistan Region referendum is not enough to reassure Ankara. In fact, one of the reasons for the United States' anti-referendum stance probably was due to the fact that Masoud Barzani was a former ally of Turkey. On the other hand, the United States is still maintaining support and armament of the PYD in Syria.

Not to mention Washington's procrastination regarding the file of Fethullah Gulen as well as Ankara's concerns about the issue of "Riza Sarraf" – a dual-nationality, both Iranian and Turkey – in the United States, which will be used as a political and economic

pressure card on the Turkish government, in light of the indictment of a former minister and the possibility of adding other Turkish leaders to this list<sup>(1)</sup>.



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