

## Forsaken Sultan: Erdogan Isolated Ahead of Trump Meeting in Washington

Erdogan has very little to offer Trump in Syria. But the question should not be whether Trump could even turn his back on the Kurds in his fight against ISIS. It is more, whether Trump can trust the Turkish leader to not shift the goalposts at the last minute

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*Turkey's authoritarian leader, who recently brilliantly played a central role in both brokering the recent ['safe zones' deal](#) – backed by Iran and Russia – and signing off a new trade deal with Russia, seemed to be rising above the parapet as a regional leader.*

For a fleeting moment, this autocratic figure, who just scraped in by a whisker through a referendum to usher in new laws which would hurl Turkey truly into the depths of a third world country, shone for a moment. Coming out of the Astana [talks](#), you watched the newsreel footage and almost forgot about the human rights apocalypse which the country is undergoing – from thousands of teachers, judges and civil servants being rounded up on charges linked to an attempted coup in the summer of 2016, right through to the worrying number of journalists locked up in [jails](#), which is constantly compared to North Korea by many rights groups. There are currently over 250 journalists in [jail](#) in Turkey in a country where journalism has been pronounced dead under Erdogan's brutal crackdown.

No matter. That won't bother Trump. But Erdogan's luck is still about to run out when he visits the US president who will bring him down to earth and show him exactly how much the Turkish leader is worth as a regional ally. We should all expect a bump, followed by a tantrum.

Birds of the same feather?

Could it be about personalities? When we look at both Erdogan and Trump, there are an alarming number of similarities which one might have thought would have played a role in bringing them closer. Both are nationalist leaders, frothing over their daily ratings, both extraordinarily thin-skinned and more importantly, equal in their colossal contempt for democracy and freedom of speech. Both leaders absolutely hate genuine journalists and what journalism, as an empirical, feature of democracy stands for: the absolute truth.



But they are not twins. Erdogan is a political animal whereas Trump came into politics late and is driven by corporate power. Both though understand and resort to very short-term political churlishness and buffoonery. And here's where the worries lie, with Erdogan's plea for Trump to stop backing the Kurds in Northern Syria. When Trump sent 59 Tomahawk missiles into an Shayrat [airbase](#) in Syria, he was proving a point: that he, and America, is ultimately a super power. And super powers can do capricious, illogical things like that and still come out a winner. Trump needed to prove to regional leaders that he is capable of exulting military might after nearly all of his Middle East plans seemed to wane since taking office. And it worked. We may all be scratching our heads about the wisdom of hitting the Syrian Army's military infrastructure when the real target in Syria is ISIS, but it generated the media coverage and his popularity lifted back home. When Erdogan however [bombed](#) a number of Kurdish installations a few days later – almost following the example of the US president – it didn't have the same effect. Turkey *aspires* to be a super power but in reality is a fledgling compared to Saudi Arabia and Iran, or even Israel.

Back home it was met with mixed reaction, while in Washington it backfired spectacularly. The Pentagon was shocked at how stupid the [move](#) was, given that US soldiers were only about 6 miles from the bombing and if they had been wounded or killed, then anything that Erdogan would have hoped to have achieved would have been dashed.

Erdogan got the attention he wanted but he just made himself look like a loser in negotiations over how much power and support he demands in northern Syria as a new plan to take Raqqa unfolds; and how the US should now consider no longer arming the only fighting group on the ground in Syria which is fighting ISIS to any real degree, the YPG. Erdogan is beginning to come across as a jilted girlfriend who keeps making the moves to get the attention of Trump, but who just keeps on getting the cold shoulder though.

He has been hoping since January that the so-called [architect](#) of the attempted coup in Turkey, Fethullah Gülen, could be extradited by Trump. He has been also hoping for the Kurds to be left out of the push for Raqqa; and he has been suggesting that Turkey and the US should take the city together in the final push for the epicentre of Islamic extremism.

### **Ultimate threat and unsavoury alliances**

Erdogan has misjudged Trump though, which might explain why none of the three plans have unfolded. This is not a US leader who will be intimidated with threats, like the Kurd bombing. Quite the contrary. The result is that US officials and Donald Trump himself have started to humour Erdogan, for two chief reasons. Trump has investments in Turkey and Erdogan's ultimate threat would be to kick US soldiers and airman out of Incirlik airbase and to sell it to the highest bidder on the geopolitical circuit. The problem with Erdogan, Trump

advisers will no doubt be telling him, is not that he has so little to offer militarily in the region. It's that he can't be trusted. They will point to his irrational relations he courts, then rejects, then restores again which makes him look erratic and untrustworthy – whether its erratic relations with Israel, Russia or even NATO and the EU. There are just too many u-turns. Erdogan sees Russia as the new trading partner and this is where his real interests and loyalties lie. And then there's Iran, considered by the Trump camp to be the very crux of America's problems in the region and vehemently hated by most of his advisers who are planning to bomb it at some point – which Turkey desperately wants to develop relations with both with trade and energy deals.

✖ But it's not just Iran and Russia which will irk Trump when he considers Erdogan's last chance gambit to save the Turkish leader's neck as he has to convince voters in two years that he – and his new anti-democratic grasp on the country's judges, media and other key institutions – is the winning ticket for Turkey. No, it's more about the relations that Erdogan has had with groups in Syria – like ISIS and Jabat al Nusra, which few doubt were being supported by Turkey at some point. Let's not forget that ISIS managed to swell its numbers dramatically by foreign jihadists crossing its southern border; for a long time, extremists were seen as a way to destabilize the Assad government in Syria, hence allies of Turkey.

Erdogan has left it too long to come into the anti-ISIS theatre to be taken seriously.

And so Erdogan's point of view that the US should not be backing the YPG and PYD in Syria – due to their links to the PKK – is actually a triumph of futility, as arguments go. Washington, certainly the Pentagon which Trump takes seriously, doesn't take Erdogan's offer to take Raqqa together seriously. It would probably involve too many US soldiers (whereas the Kurd plan won't) and the Turks would probably shift the goalposts at the last moment.

Russia's foreign minister's [meeting](#) with Trump is a different matter. Super powers meet super powers and important decisions are thrashed out. When Erdogan arrives, he will be treated like an annoying neighbour who has arrived at the party late, on the pretext of complaining about the noise but really wanting to just worm his way in for a free drink. Small people, small issues.

Adversaries of Erdogan close to Trump will also no doubt be raising the obvious question of how far can the US trust a regional leader, who, just days before a referendum which would give him more power, changed the voting [rules](#) which gave him the critical few percent at the polls?

Erdogan's people have no confidence in their own leader in DC

Moreover, the unspoken but very real threat that he may attack the Kurds on a grander scale is also not a point which Trump will appreciate. Even from a political dimension, it would make him look isolated and petulant as sour grapes never won anyone any votes at the polls. But it's also the lack of confidence Erdogan and his people have in their own arguments. Senior advisors to Erdogan have told me that the Washington trip is so important that they don't want to risk anything ruining the event. Yet how much credibility in the first place can you give to Erdogan's visit when paranoia and a shocking lack of confidence in Erdogan's play are so patently evident?

Recently, an Oped article I wrote for a newspaper I have since discovered is Erdogan's english language propaganda sheet, was rejected because its criticism of Trump might

scupper the talks. hilariously, it was explained to me by one of the 'journalists' on *The Daily Sabah* that

"the talks are so important that we can't publish anything which is critical of Trump" - hardly a sterling mark of confidence from an Erdogan fake news journal whose entire role is to promote the Turkish leader.

If an innocuous Oped from a British journalist in a propaganda sheet is all it takes to ruin the talks, one could only assume that even Erdogan's own people have no faith in their leader's arguments or charisma, let alone his geopolitical edge.

Where will the deluded Erdogan go after this inevitable climb down? I'm expecting a grand tantrum and an even closer relationship with Russia. I'm expecting some bombing of Kurds. And I'm also expecting Erdogan to play the Incirlik card. What I am *not* expecting is my Turkish editors to keep their word and pay me what I am due for work which was commissioned by them. Erdogan's people just can't be trusted.

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