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US-Turkish Relations following the Release of Pastor Brunson:

Back on Track?

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The release of Pastor Andrew Brunson from prison in Turkey is not a magical cure for the severe crisis that has characterized US-Turkish relations for over a year. At the same time, it attests to the fact that Turkey can be pressured, and it points to Ankara's weak points – first and foremost, in the economic realm. Brunson's arrest was only one of a large number of bones of contention between the United States and Turkey, and similar to the release of Brunson, possible means of bridging the gaps on other specific issues can also be devised. Yet at a deeper level the tensions in US-Turkish relations go beyond any particular issue and are linked to a mounting lack of trust between the two countries, as well as to broader trends in US and Turkish foreign policies. Still, an improvement in the atmosphere in US-Turkish relations could impact somewhat on Israeli-Turkish relations.

From the perspective of President Donald Trump, the Turkish court's decision to release American Pastor Andrew Brunson from jail and allow his return to the United States constitutes a successful conclusion to the management of the crisis with Turkey surrounding the pastor's arrest. Although Brunson was arrested in October 2016, in recent months the US administration has intensified its pressure on Turkey regarding his release. Despite both parties' denial of reports in the US media that a deal had been reached between Ankara and Washington regarding Brunson's release, it is unlikely that progress on the issue was achieved without additional understandings.

The efforts to achieve Brunson's release were of major importance to the Trump administration, even though there are other American citizens imprisoned in Turkey on false pretexts. The arrest of three Turkish workers at US diplomatic missions has also aroused anger in Washington. However, Trump applied his full efforts to achieve Brunson's release, particularly due to the pressure from the Evangelical lobby. His decision of August 2017 to double the customs duties on the import of aluminum and steel from Turkey in order to heighten the pressure on Turkey resulted in a sharp dive in the value of the Turkish lira. Brunson's release in advance of the forthcoming midterm elections in the United States was well timed for the Republicans.

Since the failed coup attempt in Turkey of July 2016, Ankara has pressured Washington to extradite religious preacher Fethullah Gulen, who is in voluntary exile in the United States and is perceived as the figure behind the attempted coup. Despite attempts to do so, Ankara failed to engineer a “Brunson for Gulen” swap, and a scenario in which the United States agrees to extradite Gulen to Turkey still appears unlikely. However, investigations currently underway regarding Gulen’s movement in the United States have already caused difficulties for its members and the movement’s realm of influence, and will likely cause more severe problems in the future.

Brunson’s arrest was only one of a large number of bones of contention between the United States and Turkey, and similar to the release of Brunson, possible means of bridging the gaps on other issues can also be devised. Yet at a deeper level the tensions in US-Turkish relations go beyond any specific issue and are linked to a mounting lack of trust between the two countries, as well as to broader trends in US and Turkish foreign policies. US inconsistent policies vis-à-vis the Middle East, and the assumption in the region that the administration seeks to reduce its involvement there, as well as Washington’s support of countries that are rivals of Turkey, have inspired Ankara to intensify efforts to develop relations with other actors in the international system. In tandem, current Turkish foreign policy likewise suffers from discrepancies, and Ankara is perceived by Washington as creating unnecessary provocations. Turkish foreign policy is seen as distancing itself from a foreign policy of *realpolitik*, and fueled rather primarily by domestic Turkish considerations related to the failed coup attempt and by nationalist tendencies.

Although US support of the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground (PYD) and the anger that this has aroused in Ankara is still on the table, in many senses the tension surrounding this issue is less intense than it was last year. This has stemmed primarily from the anticipated imminent territorial defeat of the Islamic State, and as a result, a decline in the importance of the Kurdish forces. Moreover, while Turkish threats to take military action in northeastern Syria to contend with the PYD also endanger the American forces in that area, it is not at all clear that Turkey has an interest in a reduction in the American presence, which constitutes a counterweight to the Russians and the Iranians in Syria. It is therefore expected that the two sides will succeed in reaching understandings on this issue, even if they are only partial in nature.

Turkey’s deal with Russia to purchase the S-400 air defense systems has been another major source of conflict with Washington. In 2015, the United States succeeded in pressuring Ankara to refrain from purchasing similar systems from China. However, this time, the Turks appear to be more determined to move forward with the transaction with Russia. It is more difficult for the United States to convince Turkey to cancel this

purchase, in part given the interest of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in these batteries in light of the failed coup attempt and concerns that the Turkish air force could once again be used against him and his supporters. At the same time, and despite difficulties in previous contacts, it is possible that the United States will ultimately sell Patriot batteries to Turkey, and Ankara will decide to cancel or suspend its agreement with Russia. Indeed, opponents in Congress of the sale of F-35 planes to Turkey seek to make the deal contingent upon cancellation of the purchase of the S-400.

Ankara views the United States withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran and the re-imposition of sanctions in a negative light. In the past, Turkey was granted certain exemptions from upholding the sanctions, and it also provided Iran with substantial assistance in circumventing the negative impact of the sanctions. Despite the large scope of Turkish energy imports from Iran (in 2017, some 17 percent of all natural gas imported by Turkey came from Iran, as did approximately 27 percent of its oil imports), ostensibly Turkey now has many more opportunities to diversify its energy sources, and the United States is expected to be much more vigilant against Turkish efforts to help Iran bypass the impact of the new sanctions. American attentiveness to Turkish needs, particularly in light of the sharp drop in the value of the Turkish lira and Turkey's dependence on energy imports, may encourage greater cooperation on the part of Ankara. At the same time, the European Union, Russia, and China share Turkey's opposition to sanctions on Iran, and this consensus will allow Turkey some room to maneuver. A related question concerns the United States stance toward the possibility that Turkish banker Mehmet Hakan Atilla, who was convicted by an American court in part on charges of bypassing the first round of sanctions against Iran, will serve the remainder of his prison sentence in Turkey. The Turks also hope that the fines that will be charged to Turkish banks following Atilla's trial will not be too high.

At the same time, Turkey and the United States have both called for a quick investigation into the disappearance at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who is suspected of having been murdered by elements sent from Riyadh. Although Ankara and Washington are still cautious regarding their demands from Riyadh, cooperation between the two countries in this context will make matters more difficult for the Saudis, who are interested in putting what has become an international affair behind them. This raises the question whether the Americans will continue the current pressure on Riyadh, for if they do not, this issue could also become a point of contention between Ankara and Washington.

Brunson's release is not a magical cure for the severe crisis that has characterized Turkish-US relations for over a year. At the same time, it attests to the fact that Ankara can be pressured, and it points to its weak points – first and foremost, in the economic

realm. In actuality, the sanctions that the Trump administration imposed on Turkey were not far from Russia's approach after Turkey downed a Russian jet in November 2015 – by striking a primarily economic blow at Ankara.

In the Israeli context, the Trump administration currently does not appear to be taking action to reduce the tensions between Turkey and Israel following the crisis that erupted last May surrounding the US embassy's relocation to Jerusalem. As a result of this crisis, there is presently no Turkish ambassador in Tel Aviv and no Israeli ambassador in Ankara, and the diplomatic consuls are also absent. Still, an improvement in the atmosphere in US-Turkish relations could impact somewhat on Israeli-Turkish relations. In contrast to the crisis that erupted surrounding the flotilla incident, Turkey currently has no concrete demands of Israel as a condition for the return of ambassadors. On the other hand, there appears to be no sense of urgency from Turkey on the matter. On the contrary, in his last reference to the issue, Erdogan emphasized that in light of its leadership role in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Turkey is currently chairing the organization), Turkey needs to move ahead cautiously regarding the return of ambassadors. However, the absence of concrete demands allows flexibility on the subject, and if the Trump administration chooses to exert pressure in this direction as well, it will likely achieve success. There are thus grounds for an Israeli dialogue with the American administration on the issue.