

Transcript: October 24, 2019 Jewish Policy Center Conference call with Dr. Aykan Erdemir, Senior Fellow at Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Shoshana Bryen:

Good afternoon, or good morning depending on where you live. I am Shoshana Brian, Senior Director of the Jewish Policy Center and I will be the host on our call today. I want to welcome our members, particularly the newcomers. The JPC, as you know, is a nonprofit organization committed to bringing the best in contemporary conservative thought in both foreign and domestic policy to our members and our readers. Our last call was on changing American demographics and today we go abroad to look at Turkey and Syria. [...]

And now our program, Dr. Aykan Erdemir is Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defensive Democracies, also known as FDD. He is a former member of the Turkish parliament who served in the EU-Turkey joint parliamentary committee, the EU harmonization committee and the ad hoc parliamentary committee on the IT sector and the internet. He is an outspoken defender of pluralism, minority rights, and religious freedoms in the Middle East. And he has been at the forefront of the struggle against religious persecution, hate crimes and hate speech. He has edited seven books and he is co-author of Antagonistic Tolerance. ... Dr. Aykan, the floor is yours.

Dr. Erdemir:

Thank you Shoshana for inviting me. This is a very timely call. I'm sure we are all concerned on multiple fronts with what's happening in Syria and the ramifications, not only for the vulnerable groups and individuals in Syria proper, but also for the Middle East in general. I'm happy to kind of give a brief overview, and please warn me to stop as early as possible. So we can take as many questions as possible. First of all, let me begin by saying that, am I surprised that we are here as of October, 2019? I would say no on two fronts. One, and I have a peculiar take at this. In July 2012, Assad and his Russian patrons took a very strategic step, and that was pulling all of Syrian Arab armies, Assad's troops, from Syria's Kurdish majority areas. I called that a long game.

That was an Assad gambit, a Russian gambit that finally paid off, 87 months later, seven years and three months later. With Turkey, agreeing in the Sochi Summit with Putin, Erdoğan agreeing in the Sochi Summit with Putin, to basically Assad and Russia regaining control of almost all off Northeast Syria and without necessarily firing a single bullet. And the reason I start here is because right from the very start, I think both Assad and Putin counted on the anti-Kurdish sentiment in Turkey across the political spectrum to pull Erdoğan into a trap. And the trap was, I think they were counting on the fact that one day Erdoğan would be forced to say, "You know what, although I'm so committed to toppling Assad, I would rather have him run these territories than an autonomous Kurdish entity.

And so this is where we are. So that's the first reason why I'm not surprised, but there's a second reason I'm not surprised. And I think right from the very start, President Trump's campaign strategy and promises revolved around bringing the troops back home, disengaging from the Middle East, disengaging from

various overseas, quote unquote, "Adventures." And clearly, President Trump has been looking for opportunities to pull out. He almost did it during his first phone call with Erdoğan in December, 2018 and then there was a push back from, I think across the political spectrum and the policy establishment, which prevented this disaster back in December 2018. But the second time around I call Erdoğan the successful telemarketer. He made a pitch again over the course of a phone call and received the green light he always wanted from Trump. And basically Turkey then acted as a surrogate of Russia's, as a proxy of Russia's, and led to US pulling out of Northeast Syria.

Now, this point is very careful because we often focus on some disagreements between Turkey and Russia, and Turkey and Assad, and miss the big picture. And the big picture is when you think about it, there was one time when Russian mercenaries tried to push US forces out kinetically. And that wasn't Northeast Syria, but in the southern oil fields. And this attack received a kinetic response from the US forces and up to 300 Russian mercenaries were killed instantaneously. So the Russians learned a lesson the hard way. They've never tried it via brute military force, but then they have used, I think Erdoğan, their most important assets, to lead to a *fait accompli*, which then has led US from pulling out from Northeast Syria.

In fact, we have seen how quickly Assad and Russian forces moved into areas deserted by US forces. And you might have even come across that one image where US special forces and Assad's forces are passing by one another on the same road in Syria. So this is ... In Northeast Syria. So this is how quickly and chaotically this all played out. But I would argue that it's actually not chaos. This is a longterm Assad and Putin strategy finally paying off. And of course Iran is yet another one benefiting from the emerging new order in Northeast Syria. So this is my overall take on what happens in Northeast Syria and, and the ramifications. Now, if you go into some of the specifics, I think there are a couple of developments that we can expect. First is US has just lost major credibility and trust vis-a-vis its partners and allies.

So from now on, I think it's going to be the hedging game in the Middle East and beyond as the U.S.'s traditional partners and allies will come to see the U.S. as an increasingly transactional and pragmatic partner who can desert them overnight. So they will feel the need to either appease or turn to Russia, and even in some instances Iran, to hedge their bets. The second important result is President Trump just killed his most successful model of a lean and effective engagement overseas. In fact, he could have turned this into his one big electoral success story. He could have said, "Look, unlike Washington's earlier overseas involvements, I have run a very lean, cost effective campaign where our local partners did the heavy lifting. And this is how my doctrine, Trump doctrine differs from earlier doctrines." But in fact he just killed this very successful model.

I would say Tehran and Moscow must be very happy because this model in itself, this lean and effective engagement with local partners itself, I think posed

the greatest threat to Russian and Iranian hegemony in the region. Now, if we come down to the mezzo level, we will see with the undermining of the Syrian Democratic Council and its military wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces, we will enter an era where by the Assad regime will gradually gain more and more of the upper hand in this territory. And this will always come at the expense of the rights and freedoms and relative autonomy of the peoples of Northeast Syria, including Syrian Arabs, Syrian Kurds, Yazidi's, Syrian Christians, and Turkmen. During the transition period you might see some recognition of autonomy and some granting of rights. But ultimately we know how the Assad regime functions and this region too will converge to the autocratic regime that Assad has institutionalized elsewhere in Syria. So this is going to be a precarious period for ethnic and religious minorities in the region.

We should also be on the lookout for Islamic State militants escaping from detention centers. We should be on the lookout for them regrouping, potentially leading to not only an Islamic State resurgence, but also potentially leading to other jihadist factions, other jihadist groups also gaining some ground in this area. Overall, the ensuing chaos from the swift US pull-outs could lead to a vacuum and then a resurgence of jihadist fighting that could force the US to come back in just as it had to do in Iraq. And it would be an unfortunate consequence because it would require a greater boots on the ground, greater financial and material investment. So for President Trump, this could have been a self-defeating step. And what are the ramifications for the region? I think we will see a deepening hegemony of Russia and Iran in the region.

We will see more robust links between Tehran and the Mediterranean. And this will also tip the balance [inaudible 00:13:05] Lebanon and also in Israel as Iran will have greater capacity and ability to use Northeast Syrian territory for its land bridge to Israel. And overall, I think the pullout that we have witnessed here a short while ago, will have ramifications vis-a-vis the greater Middle East, not just in the years to come, but in the decades to come. So as someone who believes in past dependency and how sometimes small policy steps such as withdrawing a thousand special forces in Northeast Syria could have long-term and massive ramifications, I-

Term and massive ramifications. I think this is one of those moments we will always remember as an unfortunate turning point in the history of the Middle East.

Shoshana Bryen: So Aykan, we have a question on ramifications. The beginning of the question is, is Turkey going to stop 20 miles into Syria? But the reason that question was asked is because Turkey has said it wants to send refugees, mostly Sunni Syrians back into Syria. Is there going to be a movement of refugees, Turkey must have 3 million of them, from Turkey back into Syria?

Dr. Erdemir: Now let me begin by saying that what we see here is a Russian game. A Russian game plan. So Erdogan will play in accordance with the Russian game plan. He has often pushed back hard against US game plans here and elsewhere, but he

is extremely compliant when it comes to Putin since he knows that Putin can always push back harder. So here, the Sochi Agreement clearly shows that Putin has not given him a green light. So he will stop with whatever little pocket he has in between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. So this is going to be following the 2016, 2018, and 2019 cross border operations into Syria, this is going to be kind of the third Turkish pocket in North Syria, all the way from the West to the East. But ultimately, the rest of the area will be now under the control of Assad and Russia.

Dr. Erdemir: Will Erdogan be free to settle some of the refugees, Syrian refugees, mainly as you said Arab Sunni refugees from Turkey to this region? Now in the Sochi Agreement, there's a reference to, I think, voluntary return of refugees. We'll see how successful this will be because I have serious doubts that the 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey will be very willing to move into an area which will remain, to some extent, a risky area. I doubt they would like to be in such close proximity of Assad and Russian forces. So I know that the domestic and, in fact, for those of you interested, I have a recent al-Arabiya piece where I discuss all the domestic drivers of Turkey's cross border operation, and I still argue that this operation was less about counter terrorism and more about Erdogan's need to consolidate power at home.

So Erdogan has an incentive to address the rising anti refugee sentiment by relocating some of the Syrian refugees in this area, which would also serve as demographic engineering and create a Sunni Arab belt between the curves of Northeast Syria and Turkey. But this is easier said than done. When Erdogan promised to resettle 3 million out of 3.6 million refugees in North Syria at his UN general assembly address, then the calculation, the Turkish official calculation was that this would require \$26 billion. Now neither Erdogan has that kind of a budget available nor anyone else is willing to pick up the tab. In fact, there had been numerous European Union officials, European diplomats, on the record anonymously saying that this is a fantasy, this is a crazy plan and no one is going to pay for it in the European Union. So I think this is where we are. Erdogan might end up sending some of these refugees to the area just like he did in Afrin in the earlier cross border operations. But it will have to be a limited one.

Shoshana Bryen: Thank you. You mentioned that there are domestic concerns that Erdogan faces. Clearly there are. How are Turkey's Kurds responding to the situation in Syria? Where do they stand these days in relation to the Erdogan government?

Dr. Erdemir: Now I think Erdogan's key goals with the cross border operation was to fracture Turkey's delicate opposition block. The opposition block I'm talking about ranges from Turkey's moderate nationalists to center right, to center left, to the procured this HDP. And this was the block that in March 2019 won the local elections, and also in the June rerun, one stumbled again. And this was an embarrassing defeat for Erdogan, and a costly defeat because he lost his cash cows. The opposition won two thirds of the Turkish GDP and half of Turkey's population, and basically all of Turkey's major cities. Now what's the best way to break this opposition block? And that is by triggering turkeys, ethnic fault lines,

because those fault lines not only go through Turkey's electorate, they also go through Turkey's opposition block. And we have already seen that the pro-Kurdish HDP and its supporters have been alienated as what they see as other opposition parties siding with Erdogan. Because the rally around the flag effect of a cross border operation and the rising national sentiments have forced Turkey's other opposition parties to give, even if it's a house hearted support.

Nevertheless, there's support and vote to add on for this cross border operation. So this was a very smart move by President Erdogan and possibly will have ramifications in the years to come, and might, in fact, even prevent the opposition block from coming together ever again to defeat Erdogan at the 2023 presidential elections. But overall it's important, like a footnote here, it's important to note that Turkey's Kurds themselves are divided, although let's say half of them are with the procurators HDP. A lot of Turkey's Sunni Conservative Kurds have given their support to Erdogan's Justice and Development Party and still remain there. Although they have, you know, grabbing question marks in their mind about Erdogan's ongoing alliance with the ultra-nationalists in Turkey. But I think, too, quite a number of Turkey's Kurds, the Sunni Muslim identity takes proceedings over their national, their Kurdish ethnic identity, and that will allow Erdogan to hold onto them even during this cross border operation.

Shoshana Bryen:

So is it fair to say that Turkey's Kurdish community is not unified on the question? Then that raises another question about Iraq's Kurds, and the Iraqi Kurds apparently closed their border to some Syrian Kurds that would've come across. Are we looking at a divided Kurdish community across national borders as well as across ethnic borders?

Dr. Erdemir:

Let me try to answer this question on two different levels. At the political level, and at the level of the people and public opinion. I think at the level of Kurds of different backgrounds, meaning Kurds speaking different dialects, Kurds of secular or religious persuasion, Kurds of Iranian or Syrian or Turkish citizenship. We see a growing transnational consciousness, a growing transnational sensitivity about what Erdogan is doing in Northeast Syria. So even people who are opposed to the PYD and the umbrella organization, Syrian democratic council politically, I think they are sympathetic to the suffering of the Kurds and other minorities in Northeast Syria.

So this is, I think, one of the consequences, unintended consequences of Erdogan's cross border operation. We see a global emergence of a Kurdish sensitivity that transcends their tribal, sectarian, political and national citizenship, national citizenship identities.

But then at the political level, sure. There are Turkish Kurds who vote for the hip. They might not really like what's happening in Northeast Syria, but politically they'll continue to side with Erdogan. There might be the pro Barzani and Talabani Kurds in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq. As individuals, these Kurds might have sympathies for the Kurdish spreading of a

different political sort across their borders. But politically they'll be in a position to pay attention to Ankara's demands and Ankara's sensitivities.

And hence, we could continue to see a divergence between Kurdish political action, of different sorts of Kurdish political action, and kind of a more uniform emerging Kurdish global action.

Shoshana Bryen: Thank you. Going in a slightly different direction, two of America's primary allies in the region are Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two Sunni Arab countries. What is the nature of Turkey's relations with them? And what is the likelihood that they won't side with Turkey against the United States, but what is the likelihood that they will see Erdogan as representing Sunni Arab interests as opposed to American interests?

Dr. Erdemir: Now again, with this cross border operation, we have seen both Egypt and Saudi Arabia criticizing Turkey and opposing this incursion. But this time around, they were not alone. They have their peculiar reasons for opposing Erdogan, but they were basically part of the entire world with the exception of Hamas, Pakistan, Qatar, and Azarbaijan. So I think this was one moment when almost all the countries, including members of the Arab League, including Europe, including the Americas, we have seen a flood of reaction against Turkey. But then, of course, it's always important to single out, I think, GCC countries, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE, because for them this is not just about an unwelcome incursion by Erdogan. For them, this is part of their ongoing struggle against the leading patron of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Ultimately the key struggle between these two blocks, Turkey, Qatar and Hamas on the one side, and the other Arab League countries on the other side is about the Muslim Brotherhoods. Erdogan continues to be, I think, the leading patron globally of Muslim Brotherhood movements and networks, and he will continue to look for ways to undermine the pro status quo monarchies and regimes in the Middle East. And he will continue to receive pushback from those countries. And these challenges will not be limited to the bilateral level. We will see these conflicts playing out all around the world through proxy. So we will see this in the fighting in Libya, we will see this in Sudan, we will see this in Ethiopia, we will see this in the Eastern Mediterranean. So a lot of what happens these days in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the greater Middle East actually is a function of, is an outcome of this rivalry, this cleavage at around pro and anti Muslim Brotherhoods, state and non state actors basically.

Shoshana Bryen: So that is one major cleavage, the Muslim Brotherhood. Another is that Turkey, Iran, and Russia are all historic adversaries for various reasons. Iran being Shiite, Turkey being Sunni, Russians wanting warm water ports. Are these three countries, Russians wanting warm water ports. Are these three countries going to be able to work together in the future, or is this a limited duration agreement?

Dr. Erdemir:

No, I think that one of the most puzzling relationships is one between the trilateral relationship between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. And it's, I would argue, quite counterintuitive, and has puzzled most analysts, and has misled most analysts. Because when people take a historical view at these things, they say, "Look, late Ottoman and republican Turkish history is, basically, over 200 years of rivalry between Russia and Turkish states." So there should be some built-in prudence, caution, and vigilance about Russia in Turkey. And when people take a look at Turkish-Iranian relations, they say, "Look, these are the rival Sunni and Shia powers in the Middle East. They have always competed for hegemony in the region, and they have reached a modus vivendi, at least since the 17th century and the Turkish-Iranian border is the oldest border Turkey has in unchanged borders." And people say these two rivals will always keep one another at arm's length.

Now these arguments, I believe, make sense from a long-term Turkish national security perspective. But the Turkey we have at hand no longer functions in line with Turkish national security in the conventional sense. It functions according to Erdogan, according to the one man regime, and according to Erdogan's political ideological priorities, whether that's Muslim Brothers goals, whether that's personal, political survival. So Erdogan, against hundreds of years of Turkish political wisdom... and I would argue against Turkish national interests... has pivoted Turkey towards Russia and Iran. Don't get me wrong. Relations will always be compartmentalized. There will always be major disagreements, there will always be major divergences. But ultimately what really matters is, Erdogan has made Turkey, through this compartmentalized understanding, a much closer partner to both Iran and Russia, has enabled their growing hegemony in the region, at Turkey's expense, at the US's expense, at NATO's expense, and has served these two countries in the capacity of a [inaudible 00:31:02] within NATO, within... as an extension country, within the European Union, within the council of Europe, within the Western bloc of countries, basically.

And this, of course, I think is a disastrous path, not only for Turkey but also for the Middle East, because the more Iran and Russia gain a foothold in the region, I think Erdogan, if he's still in power, will learn the hard way of what kind of threats it will lead to. Erdogan has proven to be extremely careless and naive when it comes to facilitating Iran's nuclear ambitions, facilitating Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. And you might have heard him in the run up to the UN General Assembly and also at the UN General Assembly arguing that either all countries should have nuclear weapons or no countries should have nuclear weapons. And this is like a horrible call for nuclear proliferation, and probably he didn't really think through this, what it really means. Because it's not only endorsing a nuclear Iran, but it's endorsing a nuclear Assad regime. It's endorsing, basically, all around the world, all sorts of rogue regimes could then end up with nuclear weapons.

So Erdogan, I think overall, the summary of all this, is Erdogan will continue to be an anti-systemic, anti-Western, liberal, Western-led liberal world order, power. He will always look for opportunities to disrupt this, whether it is his call

for "the world is greater than five," his attempts to revise the UN Security Council, whether it's his leading efforts in helping Venezuela and Iran past US sanctions, whether it's his support for illicit terror finance, whether it's his unilateral cross-border incursion into Syria. I think the logic that binds all these rogue policies together is basically Erdogan has always been since, a young Islamist militant, an anti-Western, anti-Semitic, and anti-Christian kind of force, a leader in the making, and now a global force.

Shoshana Bryen:

So you mentioned a nuclear world, but more specifically and more locally, the United States maintains nuclear weapons at the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. Do you feel that there's any threat that Erdogan would take control of those, that he would compromise the US position in the air base, that he could somehow rattle the United States? I had argued long ago that those nuclear weapons should have been gone from Turkey years ago, but they're there. How safe are they?

Dr. Erdemir:

Unless we see a dramatic change in Turkish policy, I think for now, Erdogan's talk about nuclear weapons is empty rhetoric. For now. I think that serves, first and foremost, his domestic audience. It basically, at a time when he's failing to deliver economically, at a time when his global Muslim Brotherhood project has failed, this is what he can offer, as evidence that Turkey is a great power. Turkey is basically shaping world politics. We see echoes of this also in his propaganda about building a national defense industry. For the last three, four election cycles, Erdogan has been bragging about Turkey's first national fighter, Turkey's first national tank. These weapon systems which are really not there yet, but it doesn't matter, Erdogan is already selling those to the voters.

So in the short run, we will continue to see this kind of rhetoric concerning... like alluding to Turkey's potential developing of nuclear weapons. But ultimately, I think he will not risk it. One reason is Turkey is not [inaudible 00:35:47] state. It's not a hydrocarbon states. It depends heavily on Western foreign direct investment and hot money. And Turkey has a huge current account deficit. And unless Turkey is part of the Western economies, the Turkish economy can't really function. So Erdogan wouldn't want to risk it the way Iran is able to risk it by enduring sanctions.

But when it comes to nuclear weapons in Turkey, too, I think for now they're safe. I can't really imagine Erdogan, for the reasons I just mentioned, take such reckless action. It might still be prudent to pull them out. In fact, for those of you interested, FTD had a report titled Covering The Bases, and this report examines the growing risk of US reliance on a base, the Incirlik Air Base, in a country which is run by Erdogan basically, who is acting in increasingly adversarial manners. So again, it would be prudent for US, and also Turkey's other NATO allies, to hedge their exposure to Turkey. We have seen that Germany moved its fighter squadron from Incirlik to Jordan, which is quite a... it was a small squadron, but it's quite a telling move, because Germany ended up preferring Jordan over a NATO ally, but which shows that Erdogan's Turkey is becoming less and less a reliable ally, so any calculation around Incirlik and

basing options and nuclear weapons, I think, should take that into concentration.

Shoshana Bryen: Thank you. I'm going to ask you one last short question as we wrap up our program. Is there actually a ceasefire now in northern Syria? Has the agreement between the Russians and Turks resulted in an actual ceasefire?

Dr. Erdemir: Now, I think there is a ceasefire agreement, but it's not the one Vice President Pence brokered with Erdogan in Ankara. It's the one put in, brokered, after, I think, five to six hour one-on-one meeting with Erdogan in Sochi. So this is a Russian deal. And I would argue that the Russian deal will hold, because it's backed by Putin's strong enforcement mechanisms. So Turkey will, I think, stay within that narrow pocket, from Tell Abiad to Ras al-Ain. We might see further fighting within that Turkish pocket, not only between Turkish military and, if there are any remaining, SDF elements, but also between Turkey-Syrian proxies, these Islamist proxies, which will, I think, continue to loot, torture, repeat what they've done in Afrin, kidnap people for ransom, desecrate religious sites. So there might be some unrest within the Turkey-controlled pocket, but it's basically for its very specific internal dynamics.

But overall, what we will see is, which is already in the media today, Syrian Arab army, Assad forces, establishing border posts, regaining control in the rest of the territory, Russian military police patrolling some of the sensitive areas. And basically it's a... let's say it's a ceasefire, but it's more a handing over, handing over of northeast Syria to Assad and Putin. So once they are in charge, yes, that's the "ceasefire" we have. But I think "ceasefire" would be kind of a misnomer. So this is basically almost... I call this a kind of a capitulation. So this is the US capitulating to Putin and Assad, and Turkey pretending to be a winner. Erdogan pretending to be a winner, but also capitulating to Assad and Putin.

Shoshana Bryen: On that very depressing note, thank you for an excellent presentation, Aykan Erdemir. We've learned a lot. We have a lot to bring with us now when we read the newspapers or watch television, and we very much appreciate your doing it. Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes our call for today. Thank you.

Dr. Erdemir: Thanks for having me.