

Statement of Jeff Flake
Nominee to be the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Turkey
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 28, 2021

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is an honor to be nominated to be the United States Ambassador to Turkey. I am grateful to President Biden and Secretary Blinken for the confidence they have placed in me.

I have the greatest respect for this committee. It was my home when I was in the Senate. I have served with most of you. I know of your experience, your expertise, and your deep commitment to the national interest. If confirmed, I look forward to maintaining a close, consultative relationship with each of you.

I would like to start by thanking my family - my wife Cheryl and our five children – Ryan, Alexis, Austin, Tanner, and Dallin. They have sacrificed much through the years and have somehow managed to continually assume the best and look for the good. I am more grateful than I can express.

I am well aware that, if confirmed, I will be the first political appointee to this position in 40 years, and will arrive at a particularly pivotal moment in U.S.-Turkey relations. The United States has a longstanding and complex relationship with Turkey, a NATO ally for nearly 70 years. There are areas where our interests intersect and we are firmly aligned, and there are areas where we profoundly disagree.

As this Committee is well aware, we have for decades worked closely with Turkey to advance key national security interests, from Korea to Afghanistan and beyond. Our partnership with Turkey enables us to defend NATO's eastern flank and project U.S. power in the region. Turkey has submitted a credible plan to meet defense spending commitments by 2024 and regularly provides forces for NATO missions in the region, such as its recent deployment of F-16s to Poland.

Our interests extend beyond the security realm. Turkey is an important economic partner hosting more than 1,900 U.S. companies, including some of our largest and most recognized brands, and the United States is Turkey's 4th largest source of imports. If confirmed, I look forward to robustly fostering this vital economic relationship.

However, our relationship also faces profound challenges. Despite the United States' tireless efforts to address Turkey's security needs, Turkey still chose to purchase and test fire the Russian S-400 system. This action ran counter to the commitments all Allies made at the 2016 NATO Summit and rightly triggered Turkey's removal from the F-35 program and the imposition of CAATSA sanctions.

If confirmed, I will consistently reiterate that that disposing of the system is the path to removing CATSAA sanctions. I will also warn Turkey that any future purchase of Russian weapons risks triggering further CAATSA sanctions in addition to those already imposed.

At the same time, we should encourage Turkey to purchase U.S. defense items that keep the Turkish military interoperable with NATO. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee to determine what defense trade with Turkey is in the U.S. national interest.

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, as we all know, the authoritarian, anti-democratic impulse is resurgent in the world. There is no value that defines us more as Americans than the rights of free people to determine the course of their own lives and the destiny of their countries. In my career, I have never hesitated to speak out on such issues. I am troubled by Ankara's democratic backsliding and the negative trajectory in terms of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly in Turkey. Restoring the full freedoms of the Turkish people is a good in itself and rebuilding confidence in the rule of law in Turkey would go far toward expanding the potential for further economic investment and international partnerships. If confirmed, I will challenge Turkey to uphold its domestic and international human rights commitments while also pushing Turkey to live up to its status as a NATO Ally.

While some of Turkey's recent actions have advanced U.S. interests in the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Black Sea, other actions have been destabilizing and unhelpful. If confirmed, I will encourage Turkey to support efforts to find a sustainable long-term solution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and encourage peaceful and diplomatic resolutions to disagreements in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite the very real challenges in U.S.-Turkish relations, Turkey is an indispensable Ally, anchored in NATO and acting as both a bridge and a buffer to a region in constant flux. Our national interest is served when the United States and Turkey work together to confront the very real threats to global peace and security that emanate from Russia, Iran, and elsewhere in the wider region.

Mister Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, if confirmed, I am committed to working with you, as both former and future colleagues, to advance our national interests. I look forward to taking your questions.