

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

September 21, 2020

Mr. Robert O'Brien
National Security Adviser
National Security Council
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. O'Brien:

I write regarding President Trump's engagement with Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. I have repeatedly raised concerns about President Trump's relationship with President Erdoğan, including its impact on U.S. national security and on the proceedings against Halkbank over its sanctions violations.^[1] Recent reporting by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein has only reinforced my concerns.

In audio recordings made for Mr. Woodward's book *Rage*, President Trump said that "I get along very well with Erdoğan, even though you're not supposed to because everyone says, 'What a horrible guy.' But, you know, for me it works out good."^[2]

While it may have worked out for the President personally, this relationship has not worked out well for the national security of the United States, the country he was elected to lead. I would like to highlight three examples:

First, under President Trump's leadership, Turkey purchased an S400 air defense missile system from Russia in clear violation of U.S. sanctions. Though the system was delivered more than a year ago and was tested on American-produced fighter jets, President Trump has yet to impose sanctions on Turkey for this behavior. This passive approach has emboldened Turkey, threatened the cohesion of NATO and endangered the security of countries in the region, including Israel, Greece and Cyprus.

Second, earlier this year, President Erdoğan ordered that Hagia Sophia and the Kariye museum be converted into mosques. These two historic and sacred sites hold deep religious and historical importance to the Christian orthodox community throughout the world. I am very disappointed that President Trump's influence with President Erdoğan apparently did not extend to preventing

^[1] See, e.g., "Menendez Questions State Dept. Official about Trump, Giuliani Effort to Free Iran Sanctions Violators," <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/menendez-on-pres-trumps-lifting-of-sanctions-on-turkey>; "Menendez Lists Top 10 Questions for Trump-Erdogan Meeting," Nov. 13, 2019, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/menendez-lists-top-10-questions-for-trump-erdogan-meeting>, "Menendez Asks Impeachment Managers Whether Trump Repeatedly Placed His Personal and Political Interests Above our National Security Interests," <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/video-release-menendez-asks-impeachment-managers-whether-trump-repeatedly-placed-his-personal-and-political-interests-above-our-national-security-interests>.

^[2] Bob Woodward, *Rage*, Simon & Schuster, Sept. 15, 2020.

these affronts to Christianity from taking place. President Trump's Ambassador to Ankara visited Hagia Sophia soon after its conversion, sending a clear message of acquiescence to President Erdoğan.

Third, I was proud to lead the Senate last December in adopting a resolution that recognized the Armenian Genocide. For too long the United States has ignored the truth, which has hampered our credibility in calling out similar crimes that have taken place around the world. This historic resolution passed by unanimous consent and finally put the U.S. Senate on the record as accepting the facts of this terrible crime. The resolution faced strong opposition by the White House and President Erdoğan. In fact, at the behest of the White House, three separate Senators objected on the floor of the Senate to earlier efforts to pass the legislation.

In each of these examples, President Trump's positions or silence appear to have been swayed by his relationship with President Erdoğan, or his own personal interests in Turkey, rather focused on promoting U.S. national security interests.

And there is good reason to believe that this is the case. According to a June 29, 2020 *CNN* article by Carl Bernstein, President Trump was reportedly susceptible to being taken advantage by leaders such as President Erdoğan, in part because he was focused on pursuing his own personal and electoral interests during these calls and bypassed normal protocols.^[3] In one specific example, Mr. Bernstein wrote that:

[D]eleterious US policy decisions on Syria -- including the President's directive to pull US forces out of the country, which then allowed Turkey to attack Kurds who had helped the US fight ISIS and weakened NATO's role in the conflict -- were directly linked to Erdogan's ability to get his way with Trump on the phone calls.^[4]

The withdrawal from northern Syria and subsequent Turkish invasion damaged our national security by further undermining our credibility with partners and allies worldwide, fueling ISIS jailbreaks, and endangering the lives of U.S. service members as well as our Kurdish partners. The American people deserve to understand how and why this dangerous policy was developed.

Mr. Bernstein also referenced an allegation from former National Security Advisor John Bolton's book that "at Erdogan's urging, Trump offered to interfere in an investigation by then-US Attorney for the Southern District of New York Geoffrey Berman into the Turkish bank [Halkbank], which was accused of violating US sanctions on Iran." This is not the first time such disturbing allegations have been made about the President's willingness to interfere in U.S. law enforcement investigations at Erdoğan's behest; and since these revelations, Berman was abruptly fired.^[5] It is critical that we understand why President Trump is trying to undermine one

^[3] Carl Bernstein, "From pandering to Putin to abusing allies and ignoring his own advisers, Trump's phone calls alarm US officials," *CNN*, June 30, 2020.

^[4] *Id.*

^[5] Nick Wadhams, et al., "Trump-Erdogan Call Led to Lengthy Quest to Avoid Halkbank Trial," *Bloomberg*, Oct. 16, 2019; Alan Feuer, et al., "Trump Fires U.S. Attorney in New York Who Investigated His Inner Circle," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2020.

of the largest Iran sanctions evasion cases in history, and how conversations with President Erdoğan may have influenced those efforts.

Fortunately, records that may address these troubling allegations appear to exist. As Mr. Bernstein reported,

Despite the lack of advance notice for many of Erdogan's calls, full sets of contemporaneous notes from designated notetakers at the White House exist, as well as rough voice-generated computer texts of the conversations...there are also existing summaries and conversation-readouts of the President's discussions with Erdogan that might reinforce Bolton's allegations against Trump in the so-called "Halkbank case".

Given the grave national security interests at stake, I request that you provide the following no later than September 30, 2020:

1. A complete list of all calls that have taken place between President Trump and President Erdoğan, including
 - a. Call dates and times;
 - b. Whether they were arranged through the normal National Security Council protocols or otherwise planned in advance;
 - c. Subjects covered on each call, including whether Halkbank was discussed; and
 - d. Who listened in on each call.
2. All background memoranda, notes, or other preparatory documents prepared for the President Trump ahead of said calls.
3. All contemporaneous notes by White House, National Security Council, and State Department notetakers from said calls.
4. All voice-generated computer texts of said calls.
5. All summaries and conversation readouts of said calls.
6. Your detailed written recollections of all calls between President Trump and President Erdoğan to which you listened, and of any statements that you made at the time in relation to President Trump's comments during the conversation (*e.g.*, agreeing, disagreeing, noting the danger they posed to U.S. national security, or other).

For any documents that may require a classified response, please contact Committee Democratic staff to arrange an appropriate production. Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and I look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
Ranking Member