

In this week's Türkiye in Focus:

- The phone call between President Erdoğan and U.S. President Trump focused on bilateral relations and regional and global developments. Researcher Çağdaş Yüksel analysed this conversation.
- Türkiye's senior diplomats, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, were in Damascus amidst significant regional developments. Researcher Mehmet Kılıç examined the details of this visit.
- The arrest warrant for Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and his subsequent detention have become the top story on the national agenda.

President Erdoğan and President Trump Talk Over Phone

Researcher Çağdaş Yüksel analysed the phone call between President Erdoğan and President Trump.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump on Sunday. According to a statement from the Turkish Presidency's Directorate of Communications, the discussion covered bilateral relations between Türkiye and the United States, as well as regional and global issues. Erdoğan expressed his belief that, as two allies, Türkiye and the U.S. would advance their cooperation in a stronger, more sincere, and results-oriented manner in the new period.

During the call, efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine war were also discussed. President Erdoğan emphasised that they support Trump taking direct initiative in this matter. Throughout the war, Türkiye has maintained an independent diplomatic stance in the international arena by defending Ukraine's territorial integrity while preserving balanced relations with Russia. This approach has made Türkiye an indispensable actor from the U.S. perspective. In this regard, Türkiye's mediation mission not only contributes to regional peace but also strengthens its position in relations with the U.S.

Another key topic on the agenda was Syria. Erdoğan highlighted the importance of lifting sanctions on Syria to restore stability, establish a functional new administration, and facilitate normalisation. He emphasised that this would enable Syrians to return to their homeland.

One of Türkiye's long-standing concerns has been Washington's support for the terrorist elements of the YPG/PYD in Syria. However, at this stage, Türkiye remains committed to its red lines while seeking a lasting solution in coordination with Syria's new administration. In this context, Erdoğan's call for lifting sanctions on Syria and facilitating regional normalisation

is highly significant. If the U.S. takes Türkiye's concerns into account, it could help build new trust in bilateral relations.

One of the most critical issues discussed was Türkiye's expectations regarding the procurement of F-16 fighter jets and its return to the F-35 program. Since 2021, Türkiye has been negotiating with Lockheed Martin to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter jets and has prioritised the modernisation of its existing fleet.

Erdoğan requested the removal of defence industry restrictions imposed on Türkiye under CAATSA sanctions and demanded Türkiye's reinstatement in the F-35 program. Türkiye participated initially in this project not just as a customer but also as a production partner. If the Trump administration lifts CAATSA sanctions and removes barriers to Türkiye's defence industry, this would be a crucial step not only in military terms but also in rebuilding the Türkiye-U.S. strategic partnership.

The Erdoğan-Trump call can be seen as a development where Türkiye articulated its diplomatic and military demands, signalling a new phase in Türkiye-U.S. relations. With its effectiveness in counterterrorism and diplomatic initiatives, Ankara has positioned itself as a key actor in the global arena. At a time when the U.S. is reshaping its relations with European allies, Ankara's significance for Washington is growing even further.

President Erdoğan and U.S. President Trump are expected to meet at the White House at the end of April. This summit could mark a turning point in shaping the future of bilateral relations. The future of Türkiye-U.S. relations will be shaped by the level of cooperation in key areas such as defence, counterterrorism, the Ukraine war, Syria, and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Türkiye's Diplomatic Engagement with Damascus and Regional Security Dynamics



(Arda Küçükakaya - Anadolu Agency)

Researcher Mehmet Kılıç assessed the visit of senior Turkish diplomats to Damascus.

Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's high-level visit to the Syrian capital, Damascus, accompanied by Minister of National Defence Yasar Guler and Head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) İbrahim Kalin, is considered a significant turning point in light of recent developments in Syria and regional security dynamics. The fact that this visit was not included in the monthly schedule and occurred after the "strong support for Syria" message in the last cabinet meeting highlights the importance of Türkiye's place in Syria and its ongoing events. Additionally, the visit's timing, coinciding with interim President al-Sharaa's announcement of the main articles of the new constitution, underscores Türkiye's commitment to and support for Syria's political transformation process.

Notably, Türkiye's high-level visit to Damascus came after several significant developments. One of these was an insurgency campaign led by pro-Assad factions, aimed at inciting sectarian violence in Syria, which was eventually suppressed. Through this visit, Türkiye not only expressed its clear support for the Syrian government in the wake of the subversion but also reinforced the message that any sectarian conflict threatening Syria's internal stability is viewed as a wider regional threat.

The second significant development is the 8-point agreement between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the interim government. This agreement stipulates that the SDF will hand over control of border gates, airports, and oil fields to the Syrian interim government, and its armed forces will be integrated into the Syrian national army. However, the details of the agreement remained sketchy on whether the SDF would join the national

army as a bloc or individually. Ankara is particularly concerned that should the SDF enter the national army as a consolidated force, it could preserve its autonomy and transform into a decentralised and uncontrollable military structure, potentially creating instability along Türkiye's southern border. This scenario could jeopardise Türkiye's strategic interests in the region, particularly regarding the fight against PKK-affiliated groups. Türkiye's main expectation is that the SDF fully integrates into the Syrian security bureaucracy and ceases to exist as a separate entity. One of the main objectives of the visit was to convey these concerns directly to the interim government and minimise the risks on the ground.

Another important aspect of the visit is Israel's expansionist policies in the Golan Heights, which are directly related to Syria's territorial integrity. Following the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad government, Israel has expanded its occupation in the Golan Heights and has openly declared that it will not withdraw from the area. Through this high-level visit, Türkiye once again emphasised its opposition to such actions that violate Syria's sovereignty. It clarified that it would not tolerate any steps to alter the region's status quo.

In this context, Türkiye's high-level visit to Damascus should be seen as an essential diplomatic initiative, not only in terms of Ankara-Damascus relations but also regarding Syria's internal security structure, regional power balances, and the strategic actions of international actors in Syria. In the short term, Türkiye's primary objective is to prevent the SDF from becoming an independent military entity and to ensure that the process proceeds within the framework of Syria's sovereignty. In the long term, Türkiye aims to strengthen regional stability and secure its borders by establishing cooperation with Syria in the new era.

Arrest warrant issued for Istanbul Mayor

On March 19, 2025, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office issued an arrest warrant for Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and 99 others on charges of corruption, bribery, and terrorism-related offences, according to authorities.

Istanbul prosecutors stated that the investigation, initiated based on witness testimonies and financial crime reports, accuses İmamoğlu of leading a criminal organisation involved in systematic fraud, bid-rigging, embezzlement, and bribery.

İmamoğlu has been taken into custody on two separate charges: one involving alleged collaboration with the PKK and the other related to corruption. The indictment describes İmamoğlu as the leader of an organised criminal group.

Prosecutors claim that İmamoğlu appointed close associates from his previous tenure as mayor of the Beylikdüzü district to key positions within the Istanbul Municipality and its subsidiaries, creating a network that funnelled funds into shell companies for personal enrichment.

Financial reports claim that contractors awarded city projects were coerced into making payments to İmamoğlu and his associates.

This decision has sparked strong reactions from the opposition. However, it is difficult to say that these reactions have converged into a unified strategy.

İmamoğlu has been a prominent figure as the potential presidential candidate of the CHP. He was expected to be officially announced as the party's nominee through an internal primary scheduled for March 23. Despite the presidential elections being three years away, the CHP had already decided to determine its candidate in advance.

The most serious charge against İmamoğlu is that he established and led a criminal organisation for financial gain. He is accused of engaging in illegal fundraising, rigging tenders, and other related offences. The investigation is reportedly centred around the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and its affiliated companies.

The second case against the mayor concerns claims that he facilitated the PKK's urban operations during the March 31, 2024, local election process.



(Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

Another significant development regarding İmamoğlu is the revocation of his university diploma. İstanbul University has annulled the diplomas of 28 individuals, including İmamoğlu, citing irregularities in inter-university transfer procedures. This decision carries significant political consequences, as it obstructs İmamoğlu's path to a potential presidential candidacy. Under Turkish law, a presidential candidate must hold a bachelor's degree.

These developments are expected to stay at the forefront of Türkiye's political agenda for the foreseeable future. The main opposition party is struggling to formulate a response to the accusations against one of its most prominent leaders. Meanwhile, within the CHP leadership, its executive ranks, and among journalists and intellectuals aligned with the party, there appears to be a lack of consensus on how to address the situation.

Highlights

■ Vice President Cevdet Yılmaz announced that after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, more than 145,000, and since nearly 900,000 Syrian migrants have returned to their country.

■ The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Directorate of Communications strongly condemned Israel's recent attacks on Gaza.

■ Starting from July 1, Turkey will assume the role of commanding the NATO Allied Reaction Force Amphibious Task Force and the Landing Force Command for the first time.

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