

POLITICS

Trump Lifts Sanctions on Turkey as Moscow-Brokered Cease-Fire Takes Hold

Bipartisan criticism of Syria pullout intensifies; some U.S. troops to remain to protect oil fields

By Vivian Salama and Rebecca Ballhaus

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WASHINGTON—President Trump said he is lifting U.S. sanctions against Turkey as its forces suspended their offensive against the Kurds in northern Syria and instituted a separate agreement with Moscow that sent Russian security forces to begin patrolling nearby.

The approximately six-day pause began midday Wednesday after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey struck a deal with President Vladimir Putin of Russia in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi a day earlier.

Speaking at the White House Wednesday, Mr. Trump said the Turkish government informed his administration Wednesday that it is stopping combat and making the U.S.-negotiated cease-fire permanent, adding, “And it will indeed be permanent.”

“So the sanctions will be lifted unless something happens that we are not happy with,” said Mr. Trump, referring to the sanctions imposed earlier this month against Turkey’s defense, interior and energy ministers and their departments, coupled with a threat to raise U.S. tariffs on steel imported from Turkey to 50%.

The deal negotiated between Ankara and Moscow effectively supplemented a cease-fire agreement brokered by Vice President Mike Pence last week that expired on Tuesday and highlights how the U.S. withdrawal has diminished Washington’s ability to exert influence in Syria.

U.S. lawmakers in both parties, who have criticized Mr. Trump’s moves on Syria, questioned his assertions Wednesday and called for more forceful action. “Erdogan has NOT agreed to stop all military operations in Syria,” Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) wrote in a Twitter message following Mr. Trump’s remarks. He said Russia and Turkish forces have plans for removing Kurdish forces along the border, “including Kurdish cities.”

Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, the chamber's Democratic leader, the Senate Democratic leader, said the decision to lift the sanctions rewards Mr. Erdogan for its assault on Washington's Kurdish allies. "President Trump's weakness in the face of strongmen and his reckless decision-making is putting the lives of our allies, Americans, and our national security at risk," he wrote on Twitter.

The U.S. withdrawal is transforming the battle lines of the yearslong Syrian conflict, expanding the influence of the Russia-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria after more than eight years of revolution and civil war, and threatening the self-ruled Kurdish region with collapse.

Mr. Trump said he intends to keep a small number of U.S. troops in northern Syria to protect oil fields but didn't provide details. "When we commit American troops to battle we must do so only when a vital national interest is at stake," he said.

U.S. officials have scrambled to devise options to continue working with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces in northeast Syria and to protect the oil fields there. One proposal calls for keeping up to 300 U.S. special-operations forces there, who would work with thousands of SDF fighters and be protected by U.S. air power.

A senior administration official declined to say how many U.S. troops would remain in Syria, citing security concerns, adding that the president wants to "have all American troops out of Syria and that's something that we believe will ultimately happen." Asked about Russia's role in the cease-fire, the official said any agreements between Russia and Turkey are "between them" and that U.S. is watching Moscow's involvement in the region warily.

The future of the U.S. troops leaving Syria remained uncertain Wednesday, more than a week after Mr. Trump ordered them out of the country's north. On Saturday, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said the troops would go to Iraq following their withdrawal from Syria, both to counter the Islamic State and to defend Iraq.

On Wednesday, Iraqi Defense Minister Najah al-Shammari told the Associated Press after meeting with Mr. Esper that the U.S. forces would only be allowed to remain in Iraq for four weeks and would then have to move to Kuwait, Qatar or the U.S.

In response, a senior U.S. defense official said that moving U.S. troops out of Syria and through Iraq would take weeks, not days, and be coordinated with the Iraqi government. A senior State Department official said Wednesday that the U.S. was discussing with Iraqi officials how long those troops would stay in Iraq and how many would be there, leaving open the possibility that some might remain for an extended period.

The Russian Defense Ministry published a map Wednesday showing that, as part of its agreement with Turkey, Russian military police had begun patrolling a 40-mile-wide area around the Syrian town of Manbij, a significant U.S. base during the campaign against the Islamic State.

A convoy of Russian military police also arrived Wednesday in Kobani, a town that is an icon of the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria and a symbol of the fight against the Islamic State. Russian officers met with local officials there to discuss how they would interact, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that Kurdish fighters who don't leave the border area voluntarily would be driven out by Russian and Syrian security forces. When the 150-hour period expires, "the remaining Kurdish fighters will face the Turkish army's steamroller," Mr. Peskov said, according to Russian state news agencies.

Kurdish forces didn't say whether they would withdraw from the border area as mandated by Russia and Turkey. Kurdish forces withdrew last week from some areas under the U.S.-brokered cease-fire, but remain in place across a much larger area running along the border from which Turkey and Russia now seek to remove them.

President Trump spoke Wednesday with Mazloun Abdi, the commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who said in a Twitter message posted by a spokesman: "We THANK President Trump for his tireless efforts that stopped the brutal Turkish attack and jihadist groups on our people."

He added Mr. Trump promised to maintain a partnership with the Kurdish-led forces and provide "long-term support at various spheres," without specifying details of the arrangement.

Criticism of Mr. Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops continued Wednesday as members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee questioned the administration's top envoy for matters related to Syria and the Islamic State. Rep. Eliot Engel (D., N.Y.), who leads the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said Wednesday that Mr. Trump's withdrawal decision had led to a "stunning defeat" for the U.S.

The envoy, James Jeffrey, faced similar criticism Tuesday from Democratic and Republican senators who said the move has allowed Russia to fill the vacuum left across much of northern Syria and that Mr. Erdogan has achieved his longstanding objectives concerning Syrian Kurds.

Mr. Jeffrey testified Tuesday that he hadn't been consulted on Mr. Trump's initial decision to withdraw troops. He also said that dozens of Islamic State fighters had managed to escape because of the Turkish intervention and that hundreds of Kurds had been killed and wounded.

Mr. Trump said Wednesday that some Islamic State detainees being guarded by Kurdish forces had escaped but that they represented “a small number relatively speaking, and they’ve been largely recaptured.”

“It really affects our ability to operate in that part of the world,” he added. “I have been here a long time, and I can hardly remember a policy that has been as bad as this.”

—*Nancy A. Youssef and David Gauthier-Villars contributed to this article.*

Write to Vivian Salama at vivian.salama@wsj.com and Rebecca Ballhaus at Rebecca.Ballhaus@wsj.com

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