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POLITICS

Trump Lifts Sanctions Against Turkey, Voicing Confidence in Cease-Fire

U.S.-brokered cease-fire replaced by Russia-Turkey pact amid bipartisan criticism; some U.S. troops to remain to protect Syrian oil fields

By Vivian Salama and Rebecca Ballhaus

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WASHINGTON—President Trump said he is lifting U.S. sanctions against Turkey after being assured that the country is permanently halting an offensive in northern Syria as part of a deal brokered with Russia.

“Over the last five days, you have seen that a cease-fire that we established along Syria’s border has held and has held very well,” Mr. Trump said at the White House Wednesday.

While Mr. Trump portrayed the outcome as an opportunity to withdraw U.S. troops and improve stability in northeastern Syria, critics among both Democrats and Republicans have said it amounts to the abandonment of Kurdish fighters who have been longtime U.S. allies and cedes influence over the area to Russia, which is sending troops into the region.

Mr. Trump said the Turkish government informed his administration Wednesday that it is stopping combat and making the 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,” Mr. Trump said.

Mr. Trump also said he intends to keep a small number of U.S. troops in northern Syria to protect the 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.

The president spoke Wednesday with Mazloum 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.

The sanctions Mr. Trump said he was lifting were imposed earlier this month by the U.S. Treasury Department 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%.

Days later, Mr. Trump offered to ease those sanctions if Turkey agreed to halt its assault on Syria.

Mr. Trump credited his administration for the cease-fire, worked out by Vice President Mike Pence during a trip to Ankara last week to establish a safe zone.

The U.S.-Turkey cease-fire has been replaced by a new one negotiated between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a meeting Tuesday in Russia. Under that cease-fire, Russian forces will help move Kurdish fighters out of a much larger safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Criticism of Mr. Trump’s decision to withdraw American 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.

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.”

Rep. Eliot Engel (D., N.Y.), who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said Wednesday that Mr. Trump’s withdrawal decision had led to a “stunning defeat” for the U.S.

“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.”

U.S. officials have been scrambling to come up with options to keep 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 American air power.

The haste with which the Trump administration made its withdrawal plans has also cause friction with Iraqi officials, who have said the U.S. troops that are moving there from Syria should leave Iraq within four weeks. Defense Secretary Mark Esper consulted in Baghdad with top Iraqi officials Wednesday.

—*Michael R. Gordon contributed to this article.*

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