

MIDDLE EAST

Trump, Democrats Clash After House Passes Resolution Opposing U.S. Withdrawal in Syria

Democrats accuse President Trump of insulting House Speaker Pelosi; House GOP Leader McCarthy says the speaker tried to make the meeting unproductive



House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D, Md.), House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D, Calif.) and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D, N.Y.) speaking after the volatile meeting with President Trump at the White House in Washington. PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Andrew Duehren, Vivian Salama, Lindsay Wise and David Gauthier-Villars

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House Republicans deserted President Trump to oppose his withdrawal of troops from Syria, a prelude to a rancorous White House meeting with congressional leaders in which the president insulted Democrats before they walked out.

The acrimony came after House Democrats and Republicans voted overwhelmingly on Wednesday to oppose his troop pullout and urge the administration to contain the fallout from Turkey's incursion into Syria. Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were set to travel to Turkey for talks on Thursday.

The House measure—which passed by a 354-to-60 vote—was unanimously backed by Democrats. They were joined by 129 Republicans, a rare display of GOP opposition to a stance held by the Republican president on a high-profile matter.

After the vote, congressional leaders including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.), met with Mr. Trump at the White House. The meeting was brief and contentious, with Mr. Trump calling Mrs. Pelosi a “third-rate politician” and Mrs. Pelosi later countering that Mr. Trump was experiencing a meltdown.

The clash came as administration officials headed to Ankara for meetings with Turkish leaders, a mission clouded with uncertainty after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey rebuffed calls for a cease-fire and Mr. Trump said the Turkish assault had “nothing to do with us.” Mr. Trump said on Wednesday that the Kurds—longtime U.S. allies in the fight against Islamic State but seen by Turkey as terrorists—“are no angels.”

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), who differs with Mr. Trump on Syria, wrote in a Twitter message that the president’s remarks “completely undercut Vice President Pence and Sec. Pompeo’s ability to end the conflict.”

In advance of the diplomacy, the White House released on Wednesday a brief letter written by Mr. Trump to Mr. Erdogan in which Mr. Trump implored his counterpart in colloquial language to be reasonable, urging him: “don’t be a fool.” The letter was sent on Oct. 9, days after Mr. Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces in the area, clearing the way for the long-threatened incursion by Turkey.

Mr. Erdogan’s office didn’t respond to messages seeking comment on whether the Turkish president had received the letter.

Amid the U.S. and international debate, U.S. forces continued moving away from previously occupied Syrian bases, navigating through areas of rival forces. On Tuesday, troops called in an Apache helicopter and jet fighters to ward off armed Turkish-backed groups.

On Wednesday, the U.S. military said two F-15E jet fighters carried out an airstrike to destroy an ammunition-storage facility, latrines, tents and other parts of the Syria headquarters of the U.S. campaign to destroy Islamic State after pulling its forces from the base.

The House vote was the first formal step lawmakers have taken to register their criticism of Mr. Trump’s decision to withdraw troops, which was followed by a Turkish military assault against areas controlled by Kurdish forces.

The sudden absence of U.S. troops in the region, where Turkey-backed forces are now battling Kurdish fighters, rekindled concerns among U.S. lawmakers about the resurgence of Islamic State and Russian influence in the region. The lawmakers also criticized the move as an abandonment of Kurdish forces.

“The bottom line is the reckless decision of this president sends a very clear message to those friends and to those partners. And that is the American handshake doesn’t matter, that we won’t be there for you when you need us,” said Rep. Jason Crow (D., Colo.), a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The resolution also calls on Turkey to halt its military operations. A parallel measure that has been introduced in the Senate also enjoys support from both parties.

Mr. McConnell opened his weekly news conference on Wednesday with a pointed message of thanks to the Kurds. “I want to express my gratitude to the Kurds. They were great fighters. And we had a terrific alliance with them.”

Read the Letter



His Excellency
Recep Tayyip Erdogan
President of the Republic of Turkey
Ankara

Dear Mr. President:

Let's work out a good deal! You don't want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy—and I will. I've already given you a little sample with respect to Pastor Brunson.

I have worked hard to solve some of your problems. Don't let the world down. You can make a great deal. General Mazloum is willing to negotiate with you, and he is willing to make concessions that they would never have made in the past. I am confidentially enclosing a copy of his letter to me, just received.

History will look upon you favorably if you get this done the right and humane way. It will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don't happen. Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool!

I will call you later.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "Donald Trump", written in a cursive, stylized manner.

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He added: “I’m sorry that we are where we are.” Still, Mr. McConnell didn’t commit to bringing the House resolution to the Senate floor or to holding a vote on sanctions legislation.

Mr. Trump has authorized sanctions and raised steel tariffs on Turkey, and some lawmakers are proposing steeper financial penalties on Turkey, a U.S. treaty ally.

Members of both parties blamed Mr. Trump for effectively allowing Turkey to begin the military campaign that has created the new chaos in the region. “Very clearly, it was a decision by the administration that led to what you’re seeing. This is a bit like the farmer locking the barn door after the horse has left,” Sen. Mitt Romney

(R., Utah) said.

The meeting between Mrs. Pelosi and Mr. Trump, their first since the House opened an impeachment inquiry, quickly descended into bickering. Republicans and Democrats said impeachment didn't come up in the meeting.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham accused Democrats of coming to the meeting to pick a fight with the president.

"The president was measured, factual and decisive, while Speaker Pelosi's decision to walk out was baffling, but not surprising," she said.

As the discussion turned to preventing a resurgence of Islamic State, Mr. Trump at one point referred to his former Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, as "the world's most overrated general," people familiar with the meeting said.

"He wasn't tough enough. I captured ISIS. Mattis said it would take two years. I captured them in one month," the president said, two Democrats familiar with the meeting said.

Mrs. Pelosi said Democrats touched a nerve when they told him how many Republicans voted for their resolution.

"He just couldn't handle that, two-to-one, Republicans voted to oppose what he was doing in Syria," she said, calling the incident a meltdown.

Mr. Trump later tweeted a photo of Mrs. Pelosi standing up at the meeting. "Nervous Nancy's unhinged meltdown!" he wrote.

Mrs. Pelosi said Mr. Trump called her a "third-grade politician," while the White House countered that Mr. Trump had called her a "third-rate politician." After Mr. Trump repeatedly insulted Mrs. Pelosi, the speaker and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland left the meeting, the people said.

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Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California, the chamber's GOP leader, said Mrs. Pelosi tried to make the meeting unproductive before she stormed out. He didn't dispute Mrs. Pelosi's characterization of

Mr. Trump's remarks, saying "sometimes things get a little heated," but he said Mrs. Pelosi behaved in an "unbecoming" manner.

"They were both very firm and very direct with each other," a White House official said.

In Ankara, Mr. Erdogan said on Wednesday that Turkish troops would stop the offensive only if the Kurdish militia that Ankara views as a terrorist threat drops the fight and leaves areas it controls along the Turkish-Syrian border by Wednesday night.

On the ground in northeastern Syria, troop movements reflected the fast-changing geopolitical dynamic sparked by Mr. Trump's Oct. 6 order to withdraw U.S. forces.

Mr. Erdogan said the Turkish military had pushed more than 20 miles into Syria and taken control of the strategic M4 highway, which runs parallel to the border with Turkey and was one of the main supply lines for Kurdish forces. Meanwhile, Russian forces filled the void created by departing U.S. troops, notably in the border city of Manbij, where they began patrolling the line between the Turkish and Syrian armies.

Highlighting Russia's growing influence in the region, the Kremlin said Mr. Putin had invited Mr. Erdogan to come to Moscow to discuss the situation in Syria. The Turkish president's office said he would meet his Russian counterpart in Sochi next Tuesday, Turkey's Anadolu news agency reported.

Mr. Trump has invited Mr. Erdogan to the U.S. in November. Mr. Erdogan's office has acknowledged the invitation but hasn't confirmed if he will make the trip.

—Dion Nissenbaum, Gordon Lubold, Andrew Restuccia and Jesse Naranjo contributed to this article.

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