
The Summit To Sum It All Up

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Iraq, Iran and fight against the PKK are expected to be among the top talking points at today's bilateral summit between Presidents Abdullah Gul and George W. Bush, although many other issues are also vying to be included on the agenda

The presidents of Turkey and the United States meet at the White House today during the first visit to Washington by a Turkish head of state in nearly 12 years.

The talks between President Abdullah Gul and U.S. President George W. Bush come at a time of re-strengthening ties in the wake of an American move to help Turkey strike terrorist targets in northern Iraq of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

But there are also questions over the timeliness of this high-profile visit amid evidence of lack of coordination within Turkey's state apparatus.

Even weeks after the news that Gul would meet with Bush in Washington on Jan. 8 was leaked to the Turkish press, Foreign Ministry officials, as late as Dec. 20, were unable to confirm the date of the visit, which they expected to take place in upcoming months. This suggested that the president's office had arranged the top leaders' talks with the Americans in a process bypassing the Foreign Ministry.

In addition, the presidential meeting comes only two months after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Washington and won Bush's strong backing for Turkey's fight against the PKK's terrorism.

It is considered normal for a Turkish prime minister, who is head of the executive branch under the constitution, to have working meetings with the U.S. president nearly once a year to take care of outstanding issues, but presidential visits have a more symbolic and ceremonial value, particularly if they take place only once every several years.

While Bush will host Gul at a luncheon at the White House today, the Turkish president's visit does not include special U.S. favors, for example a speech at Congress, a state dinner or spending a night at the presidential retreat at Camp David or Bush's ranch in Texas.

Under the Middle East's shadow:

Moreover, the Bush-Gul talks take place at a time when the U.S. administration's mind is largely elsewhere.

Hours after the Gul meeting, Bush is scheduled to leave Washington for a major one-week trip to the Middle East, including stopovers in Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This will be Bush's first visit to Israel, one of the U.S.' closest allies, in his seven years in office.

"I am not quite sure about the 'meaning and reason' for the visit of President Abdullah Gul to Washington next week," wrote leading foreign policy columnist Cengiz Candar in the Turkish Daily News recently. "What is 'untimely' or 'inappropriate' at this point is Gul's visit to the White House on Jan. 8."

"I think the Gul visit would be more useful and effective in, say, March or April," said a Washington-based analyst. "The two leaders would have an opportunity to discuss more then."

Some Turkish officials counter by saying that Bush will make use of Turkey's "knowledge and experience" on Middle Eastern affairs.

Still, today's talks will mark the NATO allies' improved relationship after November's Bush-Erdođan meeting.

Series of talks:

In the wake of escalating PKK attacks on Turkish targets in September and October, Ankara warned that it could send its army to neighboring northern Iraq to fight the terrorists there. To avoid a unilateral Turkish incursion into Iraqi territory, Bush pledged to Erdođan to provide the Turkish military with actionable intelligence for limited operations against PKK.

In recent weeks, Turkish fighter aircraft have repeatedly hit terrorist targets inside northern Iraq, including the PKK's headquarters on Kandil mountain, as deep as 60 miles (100 kilometers) south of the Turkish border. In striking PKK targets, the Turkish military is believed to have acted on the intelligence shared by the U.S. Turkey is also pleased with the Bush administration's successful bid to thwart an Armenian genocide bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The number one agenda item in today's talks will be the anti-PKK campaign. U.S. officials have made it clear that they want to see Turkey's military campaign against the PKK to be accompanied by political moves toward resolving the Kurdish issue.

Political solutions:

Dell Dailey, the U.S. State Department's counter-terrorism chief, said Washington preferred a political solution to the PKK problem.

"We're going to be talking about the various aspects of our bilateral relationship; also going to be talking about a lot of issues in Turkey's neighborhood. They'll be talking about Iraq. I expect Iran will be a topic of conversation," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack on Thursday.

"Obviously the two men will discuss what's on their mind. There's a long list of things they can discuss," said Bush's national security adviser Stephen Hadley last week.

The discussion is also expected to include the Middle East question, Pakistan and Turkey's bid to join the European Union.

Gul will also meet with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates here before heading for New York where he will discuss the Cyprus problem with UN Secretary General

Ban Ki-Moon. Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, Economy Minister Mehmet Pimpek and Energy Minister Hilmi Guler are accompanying Gul on the U.S. trip.

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