

## ERDOGAN VISITS TRUMP, AMID FRICTION BETWEEN US, TURKEY

**WASHINGTON:** The United States is on a collision course with its NATO ally Turkey, pushing ahead with arming Syrian Kurds after deciding the immediate objective of defeating Islamic State militants outweighs the potential damage to a partnership vital to US interests in the volatile Middle East. The Turks are fiercely opposed to the US plans, seeing the Kurdish fighters as terrorists. And when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visits the White House today, the most he and President Donald Trump may be able to do is agree to disagree, and move on.

"The Turks see this as a crisis in the relationship," said Jonathan Schanzer at the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies. The challenge is hardly new. Long before Trump took office, US presidents have grappled with the fragility of partnering with Turkey's government and the Kurds to carry out a Middle East agenda.

Past administrations have sought a delicate balance. Too exuberant in its support for the Kurds, and the US risks pushing ally Turkey toward US geopoliti-

cal rivals like Russia or emboldening the Kurds to try to create an independent state - a scenario that would destabilize multiple countries in the region. Too little cooperation with the Kurds risks squandering a battlefield ally with proven effectiveness against extremist threats and who has staunchly supported Washington.

Trump has made his priorities clear. His administration is arming Syrian Kurdish fighters as part of an effort to recapture the Syrian city of Raqqa, the Islamic State group's self-declared capital. Coupled with the US-backed fight in the Iraqi city of Mosul, Raqqa is seen as a key step toward liberating the remaining territory the militants hold. Turkey has been pressuring the US to drop support for the Kurdish militants in Syria for years and doesn't want them spearheading the Raqqa effort.

Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish group, known as the YPG, a terrorist group because of its ties to the outlawed Kurdish Workers' Party inside Turkey. The United States, the European Union and Turkey all agree the PKK is a terrorist organization.

The Turks fear any weapons the US provides the Syrian Kurds could well end up with their ethnic brethren in Turkey, who've fought violently as part of a separatist insurgency for more than three decades.

As a nod to Turkey's concerns, the Pentagon has promised tight monitoring of all weapons and greater intelligence sharing to help the Turks better watch over their frontiers. Kurds are an ethnic group predominantly concentrated along the borders of four countries - Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. But a face-to-face confrontation on the matter between Trump and Erdogan seems inevitable.

### Failed coup

Erdogan and other top Turkish officials have pressed for the US to reverse its strategy, however low the prospects of Trump changing his mind. As a result, experts see Erdogan using the meeting to confront Trump on a host of other Turkish grievances. Those include extraditing the Pennsylvania-based cleric, Fethullah Gulen, whom Erdogan blames for fomenting a failed coup last summer, and

dropping US charges against Reza Zarrab, a Turkish businessman accused of money-laundering and violating US sanctions in Iran.

"I see this trip as a new milestone in Turkey-US relations," Erdogan said, as he prepared to fly to Washington. The US, too, has a wish list for Turkey. Washington is concerned by rising anti-Americanism in Turkey that Erdogan's government has tolerated since the July coup attempt. The US also has pressed unsuccessfully for the release of Andrew Brunson, an American pastor, and other detained US citizens.

Trump also has much at stake. His willingness to partner with authoritarian rulers and overlook their shortcomings on democracy and human rights have alarmed US lawmakers of both parties. Trump's premise has been that he is focusing on deal-making. That puts added pressure on him to get results. Trump has gone out of his way to foster a good relationship with Erdogan. After a national referendum last month that strengthened Erdogan's presidential powers, European leaders and rights advocates criticized Turkey for moving closer toward autocratic rule. —AP



**OHIO:** This file photo shows Callista Gingrich, wife of former US Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich waving to the crowd during the third day of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. — AFP

## TRUMP TO NOMINATE CALLISTA GINGRICH AS VATICAN ENVOY

**WASHINGTON:** President Donald Trump is set to nominate Callista Gingrich, wife of former House speaker Newt Gingrich, to be the next US ambassador to the Vatican, CNN and The New York Times reported. The nomination is expected to be formalized before Trump meets with Pope Francis on May 24 in Rome, and once the Office of Government Ethics gives its approval, CNN reported Sunday.

A self-described devout Catholic, Gingrich, 51, currently heads Gingrich Productions, a multimedia company. Newt Gingrich, 73, was one of the few big-name Republicans to support Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign. He was speaker of the House of Representatives-second in line in the US presidential succession chart-from 1995 to 1999, and was notably

vociferous in his calls to impeach president Bill Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. The potential nomination carries some controversy: Callista Gingrich is the former speaker's third wife, and had a multi-year sexual relationship with him when she was a young congressional aide named Callista Bisek and he was still married to his second wife.

After a messy divorce from his second wife in 1999, he married Callista the following year. He credits Callista with his conversion to Catholicism. Trump mentioned the possibility of the ambassadorship in January, but the Gingrichs have been so frustrated with the slow vetting process that they have threatened to withdraw Callista's name, The New York Times reported. —AFP

## VOTE COUNTING SLOW IN NEPAL'S FIRST LOCAL ELECTIONS IN 20 YEARS

**KATHMANDU:** Counting of votes in Nepal's first local elections in two decades began yesterday but officials said it could take several days for all the results to be known. Officials said 73 percent of nearly five million voters cast their ballots on Sunday in the first round of the elections, a major step in the young republic's difficult transition to democracy more than a decade after the end of its civil war.

The government hopes that the polls, staggered over two phases, will lead to a general election later in the year. "The first phase of local elections was historic because it took place after many years. Voters also participated with enthusiasm," Govinda Acharya, an aide to Prime Minister Prachanda, said. Nepal's democratic journey took a hit in 2015 when

some regional groups rejected a constitution approved by bigger political parties, saying it concentrated power among the hill elite that has long dominated politics.

Surya Prasad Sharma, an Election Commission spokesman, said counting for 214 local bodies out of 281 for which polls were held on Sunday had started. Sharma said ballot boxes were being brought in by helicopter from remote polling centers. "It could take 3-4 days for all results to be declared because of (lengthy) counting procedures," he said. Another nine million Nepalis are eligible to vote in the second phase of elections set for June 14 that includes the restive southern plains where Madhesi groups are demanding constitutional change to address their grievances. —Reuters

## CANADA'S TOP DIPLOMAT AND DEFENSE CHIEF VISITS WASHINGTON

**OTTAWA:** Canada's top diplomat and its defense chief will be in Washington yesterday and today as trade tensions mount between the two North American neighbors. Global Affairs Canada, which promotes the country's international trade, said that Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland and Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan would meet with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Defense Secretary James Mattis and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

The ministers will also hold meetings "with important stakeholders to discuss Canadian priorities and cooperation between the two countries," the trade agency said. The visit comes ahead of a summit of NATO member nations in late May, followed by the summit of G7 developed nations in Italy. It also follows the confirmation of Robert Lighthizer as Donald Trump's

Special Representative for Trade (USTR) on Thursday.

Lighthizer, seen as a trade hawk, will play a pivotal role in renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico. Much of Trump's trade agenda has been on hold since Lighthizer's nomination in January. Last week Ross, the US commerce secretary, said he hoped to resolve delays in Congress that would allow the White House to formally notify it of its intent to renegotiate NAFTA, which would start the 90-day clock before the talks could begin.

Separately, Ross said last month that Washington was imposing duties of up to 24 percent on Canadian lumber used in construction after the two countries failed to reach an agreement in the 35-year-old dispute over charges that Ottawa subsidizes the industry. —AFP

## TRUMP, MACRON PLAN 'LENGTHY' BRUSSELS GET-TO-KNOW-YOU LUNCH

BOTH NEOPHYTES TO COMPARE PERSPECTIVES

**WASHINGTON:** President Donald Trump and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron are to hold a "lengthy lunch" in Brussels this month - a bonding exercise for two men the White House believes have much in common. Senior US administration officials said that Trump will break bread with Macron on May 25 in Brussels and "compare perspectives." The White House believes the 39-year-old French centrist-who took office on Sunday-and the 70-year-old US leader are not as uncomfortable allies as it first may seem.

This despite suspicions that Trump would have preferred far-right candidate Marine Le Pen to win the recent French election. For one, both Macron and Trump are presidential neophytes. "They are two of the newest leaders to the stage," said a senior Trump administration official, adding that a recent phone call between the two leaders very well.

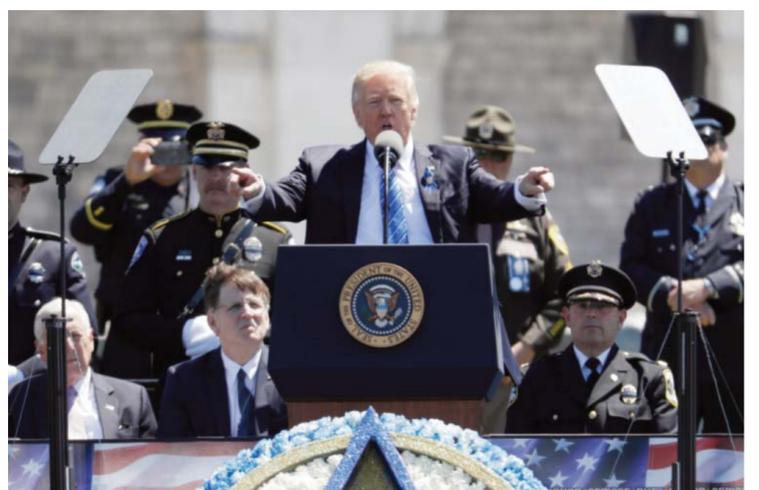
Trump "was very impressed with Mr Macron," said the official, who had direct knowledge of the call. Trump - who regularly gripes about getting insufficient credit for his November 2016 election victory - was impressed that Macron won almost 50 percent more votes than Le Pen. "It was clearly a very strong electoral win," said the official, who asked not to be named in order to discuss sensitive issues.

### Le Pen support downplayed

While their ideology may differ, both Trump and Macron "come from outside traditional political lines." Macron was the first candidate from outside the traditional political parties to win the French presidency in decades. Trump won the Republican presidential nomination, but has often shattered party orthodoxy.

The White House also believes that the impression that Trump supported Le Pen is exaggerated, based only on "one tweet about borders" and Le Pen's visit to Trump Tower in January, before the US billionaire took office. Trump aides stress that Le Pen had no meeting with the campaign when she visited Trump Tower, much less with the now-president.

In April Trump tweeted in the wake of a deadly shooting on the Champs Elysees: "Another terrorist attack in Paris. The people of France will not take much more of this. Will have a big effect on



**WASHINGTON:** US President Donald Trump speaks at the 36th Annual National Peace Officers' memorial service yesterday on Capitol Hill. — AP

presidential election!" Trump also once remarked that Le Pen had been the "strongest on borders and she's the strongest on what's been going on in France."

### Counterterrorism, economy

When Macron and Trump do sit down the agenda is likely to be dominated by counterterrorism cooperation, which the White House describes as "excellent." But there may also be some common ground on the economy. "Macron has a lot of reforms in mind," one senior administration official said, and both leaders could help "jump start Europe."

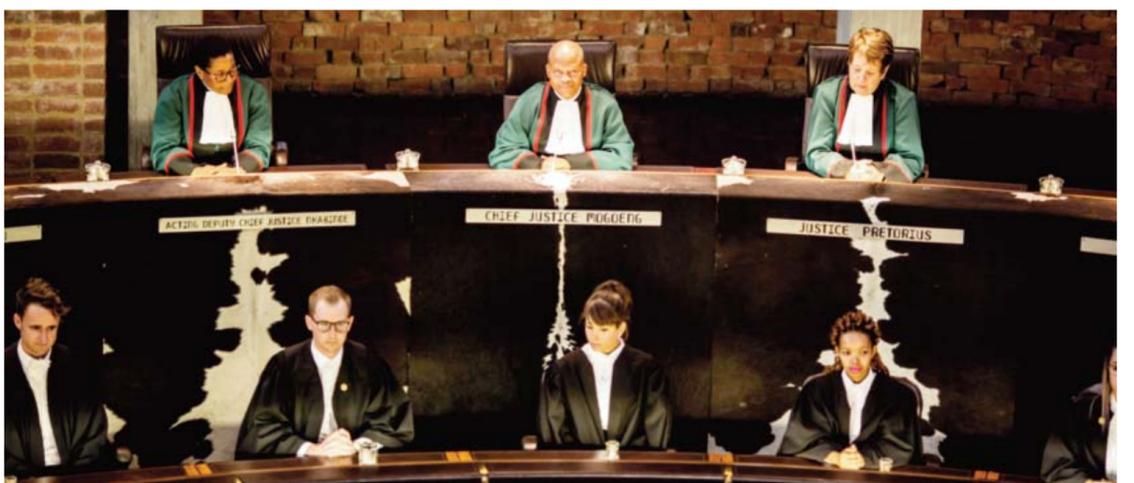
Since becoming president Trump appears to be torn between pro-business instincts and a verve for protectionism. In his more populist moments, Trump has suggested he would not consider trade agreements with the European Union, looking for bilateral agreements instead. Many European capitals see that as the economic

equivalent of divide and conquer, with potentially damaging consequences for their economies and the cohesion of the European Union.

### NATO burden sharing

There may however be a point of contention on NATO spending. Trump has been browbeating European governments to spend a higher portion of their GDP on collective defense. "As far as the president is concerned, he wants to see the two percent target met right now," a second US official said.

That is "not practical" the source admitted, but as long as Europe is moving strongly in that direction common ground may be found. "It's all about burden sharing," the US official said. Both Trump and Macron will be in the Belgian capital for a meeting of NATO leaders before traveling to the G7 summit in Sicily. While in Brussels, Trump will also meet the King and prime minister of Belgium. —AFP



**JOHANNESBURG:** This file photo shows South African chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng leading a session of the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg. — AFP

## S AFRICA COURT TO RULE ON ZUMA CONFIDENCE VOTE

**JOHANNESBURG:** South Africa's highest court weighed yesterday whether lawmakers can cast secret ballots in a no-confidence vote in President Jacob Zuma, who faces growing criticism within the ruling ANC. Several hundred protesters marched to the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg in the latest demonstrations against Zuma, who has been implicated in a series of corruption scandals.

Opposition parties have lobbied for a secret ballot and called for African National Congress (ANC) lawmakers to "vote with their conscience." The ANC holds a large majority in parliament and Zuma has survived similar votes in the past, which have not been secret. "ANC members of parliament will have to choose between what is best for themselves and what is best for South Africa," Mmusi Maimane, leader of the main opposition Democratic Alliance party, told protesters.

"They did not swear (their oath of office) to be faithful to Jacob Zuma, or to the ANC. They promised to be faithful to South Africa." The case united DA protesters with marchers from the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, with the court forecast to give its ruling later in the day. "If parliament fails to remove Zuma, then the people in the 2019 election will make sure that the ANC is voted out," said EFF supporter Daniel Mhinele, who travelled from Pretoria to rally outside the court.

The scheduled no-confidence debate has been postponed by parliamentary Speaker Baleka Mbete, who has said she has no powers to agree to a secret ballot. Zuma's sacking of respected finance minister Pravin Gordhan in March fuelled public anger over years of government corruption scandals, record unemployment and slowing economic growth.

### Legal battles

The president has recently faced unprecedented criticism from senior ANC figures, including from Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa. Zuma, who came to office in 2009, is due to step down as head of the ANC in December, and as national president ahead of the 2019 general election. He is seen as favoring his ex-wife, former African Union chief Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, to succeed him-rather than Ramaphosa. "Zuma's time is up," 22-year-old marcher Tsido Molefe said.

"We are going to march until he leaves, and today we are here to support the court case," she said. Yesterday morning, the Constitutional Court heard legal arguments in favor of the secret ballot. The court last year found Zuma guilty of violating the constitution after he refused to repay taxpayers' money used to refurbish his private rural house. —AFP