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# United States Senate

October 22, 2019

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The Honorable Michael R. Pence  
Vice President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Vice President Pence,

I write to understand how, if at all, Trump administration officials, including yourself, have raised nuclear security challenges with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey during recent meetings and discussions.

On September 4, 2019, President Erdogan told members of his ruling party that “[s]ome countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But [they tell us] we can’t have them. This, I cannot accept.”<sup>1</sup> President Erdogan also falsely claimed that “[t]here is no developed nation in the world that doesn’t have” nuclear weapons. As you know, Turkey signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1980 and is one of 191 countries to have done so. Turkey has also signed the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

On October 16, 2019, President Trump acknowledged that the United States still stores roughly 50 nuclear weapons at Turkey’s Incirlik Air Base.<sup>2</sup> The Turkish government restricted U.S. access to that facility during the attempted coup of July 2016. The base is located close to the increasingly unstable area near Turkey’s border with Syria, an area in which Turkish forces reportedly fired artillery near a U.S. Special Operations outpost on October 11.<sup>3</sup>

Though there is no evidence that the country is currently engaged in nuclear weapons development, some experts believe that Turkey, with its uranium deposits and research reactors,

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<sup>1</sup> Ece Toksabay, *Erdogan says it's unacceptable that Turkey can't have nuclear weapons*, Reuters (Sep. 4, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-nuclear-erdogan/erdogan-says-its-unacceptable-that-turkey-cant-have-nuclear-weapons-idUSKCN1VP2QN>.

<sup>2</sup> Zachary Cohen, *Trump appears to confirm open secret about US nuclear weapons in Turkey*, CNN (Oct. 16, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/16/politics/trump-us-nuclear-weapons-turkey/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Lamothe, *U.S. forces say Turkey was deliberately 'bracketing' American troops with artillery fire in Syria*, Washington Post (Oct. 12, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/10/12/us-forces-say-turkey-was-deliberately-bracketing-american-forces-with-artillery-fire-syria/>.

has long sought to keep its options open.<sup>4</sup> Recent actions by the Trump administration, including President Trump's capitulation to Turkish demands in northeast Syria, the failure to apply mandatory sanctions following Turkey's purchase of a Russian air defense system, and President Trump's open opposition to implementing U.S. nonproliferation sanctions against North Korea<sup>5</sup> may only have emboldened President Erdogan's nuclear ambitions.

The removal of U.S. nuclear weapons stored at Incirlik Air Base is long overdue. America's nuclear weapons deployment must reflect today's evolving security environment. If President Erdogan has suggested retaliation in response to removal of American nuclear weapons, this is all the more reason to remove them. The United States has previously withdrawn all nuclear weapons from South Korea and Greece, while maintaining strong alliance relationships with both countries. The Trump administration should take similar action with respect to Turkey, while launching a diplomatic initiative to mitigate any potential consequences for our allies.

Accordingly, we respectfully request a written response to the following questions no later than November 12, 2019:

- 1) In your communications with President Erdogan since October 21, 2018, including in-person discussions, has he signaled to you or to any other senior official an intent to pursue a nuclear weapons program?
- 2) Have you or other senior officials raised Turkey's nuclear nonproliferation commitments in your discussions with President Erdogan since his September 4, 2019 comments? If so, what was the response? If not, why not?
- 3) In light of the rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, how would the development of a Saudi nuclear weapon — a possibility that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has explicitly raised — affect President Erdogan's decision-making regarding nuclear weapons?
- 4) Preferably in an unclassified response, please explain the strategic rationale for storing roughly 50 U.S. nuclear weapons in Turkey, as reported, decades after their initial deployment.
- 5) Have you or other senior officials made clear to President Erdogan the importance of unimpeded U.S. access to American nuclear weapons that reportedly remain in Turkey? If so, what was the response? If not, why not?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, *Erdogan's Ambitions Go Beyond Syria. He Says He Wants Nuclear Weapons*, New York Times (Oct. 20, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/world/middleeast/erdogan-turkey-nuclear-weapons-trump.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Saleha Mohsin, Jennifer Jacobs, and Nick Wadhams, *Trump Tried to Undo North Korea Penalty, Contrary to U.S. Account*, Bloomberg (Mar. 26, 2019) <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-26/trump-tried-to-undo-n-korea-penalty-contrary-to-u-s-account>.

The Honorable Michael R. Pence

October 22, 2019

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Edward J. Markey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "E" and "M".

Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator