

## **US, Turkey suspend bilateral non-immigrant visa services amid escalating tension**

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**Istanbul:** The US said Sunday it was suspending non-immigrant visa services at its diplomatic facilities in Turkey following the arrest of a consulate employee, prompting Turkey to halt visa services in the US.

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The US Embassy in the capital of Ankara tweeted a statement from the US Mission to Turkey saying that recent events have forced it to "reassess the commitment of the Government of Turkey to the security of US Mission facilities and personnel."

The Turkish Embassy in Washington responded with a similar statement on Twitter late Sunday and said it would "reassess the commitment of the Government of the United States to the security of Turkish mission facilities and personnel." It said the measures would apply to e-Visas, visas issued at borders and visas in passports.

This week, Turkish authorities arrested a US Consulate employee of Turkish nationality for alleged links to the network of US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, who the Turkish government blames for last summer's failed coup. Gulen denies involvement.

Metin Topuz is accused of espionage and "attempting to overthrow the Turkish government and constitution." Turkey's official Anadolu news agency reported that he allegedly communicated with former police chiefs in a 2013 corruption probe, 121 people involved in the attempted coup and hundreds of people using an encrypted mobile messaging application. The US Embassy said it was "deeply disturbed" by the arrest.

Hamza Ulucay, a translator of the US Consulate in the southern province of Adana, was arrested in March for alleged links to outlawed Kurdish militants.

The US statement said the suspension of non-immigrant visa services was "effective immediately" to minimize visitor numbers to the US Embassy and Consulate for now. The suspended services will affect business, tourism, medical treatment, student, exchange visitor, crew member, media and journalist, treaty trader, diplomatic and official visas.

Relations between Turkey and the US have been tense over disagreements on Syrian Kurdish militants, which the US backs in the war against the Islamic State group. Turkey considers them a terror group and an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK, which has waged an insurgency within Turkey's borders for more than 30 years.

An infamous brawl during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to DC in May led to an indictment charging 19 people, including 15 Turkish security officials, of conspiracy to commit a crime of violence. Erdogan called the indictment "scandalous" and said his security detail was protecting him against Kurdish militants protesting outside his ambassador's residence.

US pastor Andrew Brunson, who has lived in Turkey for over 20 years, has also been behind bars for a year for alleged links to Gulen. Last month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the US was pressing Turkey to return a "cleric" while refusing to hand over another "cleric."

More than 50,000 people have been arrested and 110,000 have been fired from government jobs as part of a state of emergency declared after the failed coup in Turkey.

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- AP