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# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

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February 3, 2020

The Honorable William Barr  
Attorney General  
Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20530

Dear Attorney General Barr,

I am writing to you concerning my ongoing investigation of the Department of Justice's prosecution of Turkish state-owned bank Halkbank, and potential improper interference by President Trump in this matter.<sup>1</sup> Halkbank has been indicted in the United States as part of the largest ever scheme to aide Iran in circumventing U.S. sanctions, and Halkbank officials have admitted to conspiring to evade sanctions, and funnel Iranian oil profits back to the country through complex gold purchases disguised as money transfers.<sup>2</sup>

Recent reports indicate that you and former national security adviser John R. Bolton shared concerns that President Trump was granting personal favors to the autocratic leader of Turkey.<sup>3</sup> In particular, reports indicate that President Trump promised Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that Trump would use his authority to halt any further enforcement actions against the bank, and that Trump consequently instructed you and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin to interfere in the matter.

A spokeswoman for you refuted these reports as "gross mischaracterizations," noting in particular that you never stated that you felt the "President's conversations with foreign leaders

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<sup>1</sup> *Wyden Launches Investigation Into Halkbank Scandal*, Press Release, Oct. 24, 2019;

<https://www.finance.senate.gov/ranking-members-news/wyden-launches-investigation-into-halkbank-scandal>.

<sup>2</sup> *Gold dealer turned star witness details alleged bribes to senior Turkish official*, Washington Post, Nov. 29, 2017; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/gold-dealer-turned-star-witness-details-alleged-bribes-to-senior-turkish-official/2017/11/29/271ebcf2-d52e-11e7-b62d-d9345ced896d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/gold-dealer-turned-star-witness-details-alleged-bribes-to-senior-turkish-official/2017/11/29/271ebcf2-d52e-11e7-b62d-d9345ced896d_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> *Bolton Was Concerned That Trump Did Favors for Autocratic Leaders, Book Says*, New York Times, Jan. 27, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/27/us/politics/john-bolton-trump-book-barr.html>.

(were) improper.”<sup>4</sup> However, reports of interference by President Trump are corroborated by the facts uncovered in my own investigation. In a November 20, 2019 letter to me, Treasury Department officials confirmed the following:

As was publicly reported, when Prime Minister Erdogan raised concerns directly with President Trump in April 2019, the President referred the issue to the Executive Branch departments responsible by law for the investigation and enforcement of economic sanctions—the Treasury and DOJ.

Treasury officials went on to identify seven meetings held between Secretary Mnuchin and senior Turkish officials, despite the Secretary’s admitted “integral” role in the enforcement of U.S. sanctions generally, and the prosecution of Halkbank specifically. Most concerning was an April 15, 2019 Oval Office meeting with President Trump, Turkish Finance Minister Berat Albayrak, President Erdogan’s son-in-law, as well as President Trump’s own son-in-law Jared Kushner, and Secretary Mnuchin. This was the second meeting Secretary Mnuchin held with Albayrak in 3 days, and appears to coincide with the admitted interference in the Halkbank prosecution by President Trump. Even more troubling, President Trump, Secretary Mnuchin, and Jared Kushner held this White House meeting despite the fact that Albayrak, along with President Erdogan, appear to be personally implicated in the Halkbank scheme.<sup>5</sup>

These reports are part of a larger story highlighting President Trump’s efforts to accommodate the intense pressure campaign by the Turkish government to get investigations into Halkbank dropped, including a high-priced lobbying effort by Ballard Partners.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, President Trump reportedly asked Secretary of State Tillerson to pressure the Justice Department to drop the case against a co-conspirator in the Halkbank-assisted sanctions evasion schemes, Reza Zarrab, who had an office in Trump Tower Istanbul and was a client at the time of the President’s attorney Rudy Giuliani.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Justice Department says Bolton ‘grossly mischaracterizes’ Barr’s take on Trump’s talks with Xi, Erdogan*, USA Today, Jan. 28, 2020; <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/01/28/john-bolton-book-william-barr-denies-he-shared-concerns-trump/4595133002/>.

<sup>5</sup> Federal prosecutors alleged the following in their indictment, “Though some at HALKBANK, the defendant, supported continuing the scheme, Halkbank General Manager-1 initially was reluctant to do so because of concern that Zarrab’s arrest and notoriety would draw unnecessary attention to the scheme. At Zarrab’s request, however, the then-Prime Minister of Turkey and his associates, including a relative of the then-Prime Minister who later held multiple Turkish cabinet positions, instructed HALKBANK to resume the scheme, and HALKBANK agreed.” Erdogan was prime minister during the Halkbank scheme, and Albayrak then had been the Turkish Minister of Energy. *Turkish Bank Charged in Manhattan Federal Court for Its Participation in a Multibillion-dollar Iranian Sanctions Evasion Scheme*, Department of Justice Press Release, Oct. 15, 2019; <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/turkish-bank-charged-manhattan-federal-court-its-participation-multibillion-dollar-iranian>.

<sup>6</sup> *Trump-Erdogan Call Led to Lengthy Quest to Avoid Halkbank Trial*, Bloomberg, Oct. 16, 2019; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-16/trump-erdogan-call-led-to-lengthy-push-to-avoid-halkbank-trial>.

<sup>7</sup> *Trump Urged Top Aide to Help Giuliani Client Facing DOJ Charges*, Bloomberg, Oct. 9, 2019; <https://www.bloomberg.com/amp/news/articles/2019-10-09/trump-urged-top-aide-to-help-giuliani-client-facing-doj>.

Although Halkbank was eventually charged in the Southern District of New York in a six-count indictment related to the bank's participation in a multibillion-dollar scheme to evade U.S. sanction on Iran on October 15, 2019,<sup>8</sup> these charges came just days after the Turkish invasion of northern Syria and the resulting political backlash.<sup>9</sup> I am concerned that absent these actions by the Turkish government, the Administration's interference in favor of Turkey's Halkbank requests could have undermined years of effort by U.S. law enforcement, and may still do so.

My investigation seeks to ensure that the Administration is properly enforcing our sanctions laws. To assist this investigation please respond to the following:

1. Did President Trump, or did anyone at his direction, ever instruct you to take any action with regard to Halkbank, or any co-conspirators such as Reza Zarrab? If so, when and what were you asked to do? Did any such request raise any concerns about undue influence by President Trump in the investigation of the matter?
2. Did President Trump, or did anyone at his direction, attempt to interfere, intervene, or otherwise engage with the Justice Department's independent inquiry of the Halkbank scheme, or of any co-conspirators such as Reza Zarrab? If so, when and in what manner?
3. In a 2015 interview, President Trump stated about Turkey, "I have a little conflict of interest because I have a major, major building in Istanbul." Given his admitted conflict of interest, and the direct ties between Halkbank executives and Trump Towers Istanbul, do you feel it is appropriate for President to be communicating with the Department of Justice about this matter?
4. Identify any meetings or conversations you or any other senior Justice Department officials have held with President Erdogan, Finance Minister Berat Albayrak, or any other senior Turkish officials since your confirmation, identify the participants in those conversations and meetings, and the nature of those discussions including whether or not they included Halkbank.
5. Identify any meetings or conversations you or any other senior Justice Department officials have held with Ballard Partners or any other lobbyists on behalf of the Turkish government since your confirmation, identify the participants in those conversations and meetings, and the nature of those discussions including whether or not they included Halkbank.

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[charges; Trump Tower: Dictators' Home Away From Home](https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-tower-dictators-home-away-from-home), Daily Best, Sep. 30, 2015 Updated April, 14, 2017; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-tower-dictators-home-away-from-home>.

<sup>8</sup> *Turkish Bank Charged in Manhattan Federal Court for Its Participation in a Multibillion-dollar Iranian Sanctions Evasion Scheme*, Department of Justice Press Release, Oct. 15, 2019; <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/turkish-bank-charged-manhattan-federal-court-its-participation-multibillion-dollar-iranian>.

<sup>9</sup> *Trump Defends Syria Decision Amid Republican Backlash*, CNN, Oct. 8, 2019; <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/07/politics/mitch-mcconnell-republican-response-syria-kurds/index.html>.

6. Did you or any other senior Justice Department officials ever appeal directly to the Treasury Department, at any level, on behalf of President Trump or the Turkish government?
7. According to a statement by the Department of Justice about the conversation between you and former National Security Advisor Bolton, "There was no discussion of 'personal favors' or 'undue influence' on investigations, nor did Attorney General Barr state that the President's conversations with foreign leaders (were) improper." Do you feel it was improper for President Trump to invite Turkish President Erdogan to the Oval Office, after he had been implicated by the prosecutors in Halkbank's sanctions evasion scheme?
8. Given the serious nature of the disclosures in the Treasury Department's response to my investigation and in recent reporting, will you commit to recusing yourself from any further involvement in the investigation and prosecution of Halkbank?

Please provide answers to these questions no later than February 18, 2020. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden

Ranking Minority Member