

Sent from Just after 2 a.m. Caracas time on January 3, 2026, U.S. Special Forces descended into Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's compound, quickly seized him, and transported him by helicopter, ship, and plane to New York City, where the self-styled revolutionary now faces charges at the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York relating to narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, and weapons charges.

While many U.S. politicians criticized both the legality of President Donald Trump's actions and his motivations, none shed tears for Maduro, a brutal dictator whose years in power, first as vice president and then after Hugo Chávez's death, as president, impoverished the country. Nor do many American officials of either party doubt Maduro's links to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or U.S.-designated terror groups like Hezbollah and Hamas.

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There is precedent for Maduro's capture. In December 1989, President George H.W. Bush launched Operation Just Cause to capture Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. Military action concluded just over a month later when U.S. forces seized and deported Noriega. A Miami court arraigned Noriega on ten charges relating to drug trafficking, racketeering, and money laundering. Initially sentenced to forty years in prison, a judge reduced that to thirty years. Because of good behavior, Noriega served only seventeen years, at the conclusion of which he faced trial in France and prison in Panama on other charges, where he ultimately died in 2017.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan should be very worried. Like Chávez and through him Maduro, Erdoğan has leveraged an initial election victory into an iron grip on power. He has won no election legitimately in two decades, either manipulating election results or imprisoning opposition candidates. Reporters Without Borders [ranks](#) Turkey and Venezuela side-by-side in press abuse. Both Erdoğan and Maduro have embraced, if not supported, revolutionary and terrorist groups, including Hamas and Hezbollah. Erdoğan's family members profited from oil and trade with the Islamic State.

Erdoğan may not care, but instead he can quite literally get away with murder because of his close personal ties to Trump. He would be wrong. His close ties with the White House will likely shatter when Trump leaves office. Indeed, Erdoğan should reflect on other leaders who once gambled on close ties to Washington. Both Noreiga's and Maduro's political fortunes shifted with U.S. politics. President Ronald Reagan and the

Central Intelligence Agency initially embraced Noriega as a potential ally against Communist insurgencies, before George H.W. Bush, a former director of Central Intelligence, decided the price of tolerating Noriega's activities and behaviors was too great to bear. Likewise, the Obama administration once embraced the Chávez/Maduro narrative, with John Kerry as the 2004 Democratic nominee for president stating that he would support democratically elected leaders like Chávez, even if they were "imperfect."

Nor are such flips limited to Latin America. Less than a decade after Reagan depicted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein as a force for moderation in the Middle East, the elder Bush was at war with him. A progressive successor to Trump might treat Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a pariah rather than a partner.

What Erdoğan could face, however, is not only a decline in fortunes, but the Maduro treatment. Maduro's wife reportedly laundered drug money in Turkey, something Maduro's forthcoming trial might expose. Erdoğan oversaw a multibillion-dollar gold-for-oil sanctions evasion scheme with Iran. His support for terror groups ranging from Hamas and Hezbollah to anti-India groups in Kashmir is open knowledge. In 2015, the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* published photographs and video of Turkey's intelligence service—whose then-director is foreign minister today—supplying Al Qaeda-affiliated groups with weaponry. Rather than crack down on Al Qaeda's Turkish suppliers, Erdoğan ordered his justice ministry to charge the newspaper. Rumors and evidence relating to Erdoğan's alleged [involvement](#) in drug trafficking swirl.

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Erdoğan's arrogance toward the United States has burned bridges. Turkey just lost a years-long court case regarding the attack by Erdoğan's bodyguards on peaceful protestors in Washington, D.C.'s Sheridan Circle. The Turkish Embassy long ago stopped representing Turkish interests and instead acts as a political office for Erdoğan's political party. Congressmen across the U.S. political spectrum despise Erdoğan.

Erdoğan long has excelled at ingratiating himself with U.S. presidents, but his run of luck may end soon. The question he should consider is whether it is conceivable that a future U.S. president might order a Maduro-like operation against Erdoğan. Just as the Central Intelligence Agency inserted cells into Caracas to track Maduro's location, it is likely they have also done so in Turkey. Erdoğan's movements might be secret to Turks, but they are not to Americans.

The size of Erdoğan's palaces and their relative isolation make a snatch-and-grab relatively easy. While Erdoğan has purged the military to surround himself with loyalists,

this has come at the expense of the Turkish Army's own competence. It is one thing to bomb unarmed Kurdish farmers; it is another to face U.S. Special Forces.

Turkey might cry NATO, but this will fall flat with a finding that Erdoğan's likely fraud in the coming 2028 elections disqualifies him as the legitimate leader of Turkey. NATO would also have to issue an Article V finding, but they would never do so against the United States, even if Erdoğan had any friends among European leaders who may fear him but do not like him. Erdoğan would be hard-pressed, as well, to win much sympathy if a U.S. court issued charges against him before U.S. Special Forces rendered him, given how he and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan masterminded a global rendition campaign to return political and religious dissidents to Turkey to face torture and imprisonment.

It may seem farfetched today to consider a future operation to deliver Erdoğan to the Southern District of New York, but Erdoğan may take his last gamble if he believes himself immune to Maduro's fate. He may find that the second his hands are zip-tied behind his back and sensory-deprivation glasses and earmuffs are placed on his head, all the friends whose worship he once adored will fade away.