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U.S. Senator Told Russian Prank Callers He's 'Sympathetic' to Turkey in Kurdish Row

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Lindsey Graham **John Pemble / Iowa Public Radio Images**

A pair of notorious Russian pranksters duped U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham into telling them this summer that he supported Turkey's stance against Kurdish separatists in marked contrast to his public statements, according to audio of their phone talks published Friday.

Turkey launched a military operation Wednesday against Kurdish fighters in Syria as U.S. Republicans condemned President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria. Republican Senator Graham — usually a vocal Trump ally — has repeatedly criticized Trump's withdrawal and unveiled a framework for sanctions on Turkey.

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"I'm sympathetic to the YPG [Kurdish militia] problem, and so is the president, quite

frankly," Graham told the pranksters, Vladimir "Vovan" Kuznetsov and Alexei "Lexus" Stolyarov, who were posing as Turkey's defense minister.

"Everything I worried about has come true, and now we gotta make sure that Turkey is protected from this threat in Syria," Graham can be heard telling the callers he thought were Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar.

GQ magazine quoted extensively from the July 30 call and Graham's Aug. 12 follow-up on Thursday, and the pranksters posted full audio of both conversations on YouTube the next day.

"I personally like [Turkish] President Erdogan, I think President Trump likes President Erdogan. I think he's a strong man, and we need to deal with strong people," Graham said in the second conversation.

Their stunt was the latest in a series of high-profile pranks the two have carried out on public figures including French President Emmanuel Macron and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as well as Graham himself in 2017.

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Their level of access to high-profile figures — as well as the lack of intervention by Russian security services — has led observers to suggest "Vovan and Lexus" are working under an arrangement with the Kremlin. The pranksters asked GQ author Julia Ioffe not to "mix us in with the Kremlin." "As in, don't write about our connection with the Kremlin as an established fact."

Turkey has branded the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia as terrorists because of their ties to militants who have waged an insurgency in Turkey. But many U.S. officials credit the Kurds with helping American troops defeat Islamic State militants.

In a statement on Twitter on Tuesday, Graham warned Ankara of "sanctions from hell" if it moved into northern Syria.

Graham's spokesman Kevin Bishop told GQ that the Russian prank call "slipped through the cracks."

"They got him," Bishop was quoted as saying.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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