



# Turkey's stance

## Status quaestionis of an "Islamic ally" within NATO

Luk Sanders<sup>1</sup>

*The Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence produces on an occasional basis brief assessments about current events in its e-Note series. This series and other publications are available on our website [www.rhid.be](http://www.rhid.be).*



The preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty states that “[t]he Parties to this Treaty [...] are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.” How are we to interpret today Turkey’s attitude towards the “principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”? Is this country still firmly determined to safeguard freedom? In any case, shortly after the failed coup in Turkey on 15 July 2016, NATO announced in a press release that “Turkey’s NATO membership is not in question. [...] The NATO Secretary General spoke [...] with President Erdoğan, [...] reiterating full support for Turkey’s democratic institutions.”<sup>i</sup>

According to the internationally-oriented Committee to Protect Journalists, Turkey is now the country where by far the most journalists are behind bars because of their profession. However, one year after the coup, the secretary general of NATO still declared: “Democracy and rule of law are shared values of NATO Allies. On the first anniversary of the coup attempt in Turkey I reiterate my strong message that any attempt to undermine democracy in any of our Allied countries is unacceptable.”<sup>ii</sup> With the first sentence of this quote, Stoltenberg still implicitly expressed confidence in the democratic essence of all NATO members, including Turkey. Similarly, he *gave the impression* to come to Turkey’s defence in the second sentence, whereas on further consideration his strong message applies to all member states ... Does it not seem, indeed, that Turkey is undermining its own democracy? Meanwhile, tensions between Turkey and the other NATO member states are rising, causing a commotion among the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and raising questions about what we, as NATO member states, expect from each other in the field of democracy and human rights.

<sup>1</sup> Research fellow at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the Belgian Ministry of Defence or the Royal Higher Institute for Defence.

The present text aims to provide a state of play with regard to our Turkish ally. First, we will examine the current situation regarding the relations between Turkey and some of its major NATO allies, then discuss the recent reforms of the TAF. In order to conclude, we will address the question of what Turkey, as our ally, has to offer to us.

## **The relations between Turkey and several other NATO partners**

Given the then situation in Iraq, Turkey appealed to NATO in 2003, invoking Article 4, which provides for consultation between the Parties whenever the territorial integrity, political independence or security of a member state is threatened. Turkey was outraged when it appeared that France, Germany as well as Belgium had initially blocked this request for support measures. When forty-five people were killed by the terrorist attack in the Istanbul Atatürk Airport on 28 June 2016, the Western allies turned out to show much less support and solidarity than for comparable attacks in Paris or Brussels; there were no Turkish flags on Western Facebook profile pictures or on the Eiffel Tower ... Once again, Turkey was not amused. The failed coup eventually turned out to be a godsend for Erdoğan – allowing him to have complete control over the country – but he still does not understand why there were very few expressions of support from the West: after all, the parliament of a NATO ally had been bombed by F-16s (even though it were Turkish F-16s ...).

While weekly newspaper *European Voice* (former name of *Politico Europe*) awarded Erdoğan the title "European of the Year" (as the only non-EU citizen ever) in 2004, his popularity in Europa has waned since then, turning into mistrust, because of his growing authoritarianism, anti-Western rhetoric, flirting with Russia and China ... In Europe the turning point came especially when the Taksim Gezi Park protests spread throughout the country, as did the ensuing repression by the police forces. The conflict between Turkey and the USA was particularly noticeable when it turned out that the Turkish and American interests in Syria did not coincide. Turkey was not pleased when the United States only focussed on fighting the Islamic State (IS) and opted for collaboration with the Syrian Kurds. As a result, Erdoğan denied the anti-IS coalition the use of the Incirlik Air Base until 2015. Ankara even accused Washington of supporting the failed coup when it refused to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the alleged mastermind behind this attempted takeover. The independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan also confirmed the suspicion of many Turks that the United States are pressing for an independent Kurdish state in the region.

As for Washington, it was shocked by Erdoğan's attempts to purchase air defence missiles from China and, finally, Russia. The US Congress held critical hearings on Turkey, passed resolutions condemning the Turkish security services and blocked arms sales to Erdoğan's personal bodyguard unit. Tensions increased after a Turkish employee of the American consulate was arrested in Ankara, leading to Washington's decision to suspend its visa services in Turkey. Ankara responded with a similar measure.

Nevertheless, during the Turkish president's visit to New York in September 2017, Trump stated that Erdoğan "has become a friend of mine" and "I think now we're as close as we've ever been". This opinion stands in stark contrast to the opinion of the Congress, the Pentagon, the US media as well as to the public opinion, especially after the police of Washington reported "a brutal attack [by American Turks] on peaceful demonstrators outside the Turkish ambassador's residence" (who

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requested that an American preacher be released from a Turkish prison). The Pentagon's U-turn is particularly striking. Whatever happened in the past, the Pentagon was always eager to back Turkey. However, the main American critics of Turkey can nowadays be found within the armed forces. The further course of the Reza Zarrab case might also have a significant impact on the further relations between the two countries.<sup>iii</sup>

From all European countries, it is mainly Germany that has strained relations with Turkey, but the indignation is spreading throughout the European Union. Actually, before the failed coup attempt, the Bundestag passed a resolution on the Armenian genocide and the imprisonment of German journalists. Later, as German authorities barred Turkish politicians from campaigning in Germany in March 2017, Erdoğan made comparisons with Nazi Germany. Another apple of discord is Turkey's demand for the extradition of German Turks who would have participated in the coup, which Berlin fiercely denies. When Turkey refused to grant access to German parliamentarians to visit the Incirlik Air Base, the German fighter aircraft and troops relocated to Jordan. The climate became even more hostile in the context of the elections, when Erdoğan called on the German Turks not to vote for traditional parties, as they would be "enemies of Turkey". In the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, and of course Belgium, we could even observe how Erdoğan regards and treats the European Turks as his subjects.

For the moment, Turkey is still officially a candidate for future EU membership. On the other hand, these talks reached a deadlock when Turkish authorities refused to open Turkish harbours to Cypriot ships in 2009. The European Commission now states that Turkey does not satisfy the accession conditions as laid down in the Copenhagen criteria and that it is awaiting an amendment to the anti-terrorism legislation and, more generally, the restoration of the rule of law in Turkey. For the same reasons, the issue of the liberalisation of visas for Turkish citizens is now off the table. Erdoğan indeed hoped to achieve a breakthrough in the negotiations on the migrant deal, but what he actually wants is a revision of the customs union between Turkey and the European Union. Although both parties would benefit from this revision, Germany is blocking all further negotiations. The latter country also took a number of unilateral measures, such as restricting credit guarantees for German enterprises that operates in Turkey and a closer monitoring of Turkish NGOs, mosques, and media, in the hope of facilitating the release of German nationals from Turkish prisons. Turkey attributes the EU's current position mainly to the electoral climate in the Netherlands and Germany, describing it as a temporary phenomenon. However, due to the success of right-wing populism, European leaders are under great pressure to take a hard line against Turkey.

Since the Turkish constitutional referendum in April 2017, cooperation with the West has occurred more often by means of transactions or deals, less on the basis of shared values. In his own country, Erdoğan goes on undisturbed alienating even more social, political, and cultural life from the West. Following the erosion of the rule of law in Turkey, it is now the turn of the secular tradition to be hit hard: a new curriculum for schoolchildren (including non-Muslim children) based on Islamic principles, an increased separation of men and women in the public sphere, Islamic-nationalist propaganda in the media, the marginalisation of Atatürk, and a pompous rhetoric on a "New Turkey". In short, the country seems to drift further and further away from the West, but without heading to a complete break. Erdoğan is aware that the Turkish, American and European economies are interdependent, but the "New Turkey" no longer aspires to belong to the Western camp. It only

seeks to maintain selective relations that are essentially economic. Additionally, it is keen to present itself as the moral and political leader of under-represented segments of the Muslim world. Ankara seems more interested in partnerships with Russia and Iran, as was the case in Syria and during the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum.

## **Reforming the TAF after the failed coup**

Since the failed coup of 15 July 2016, the TAF have been thrown into complete turmoil. Approximately 7,500 militaries, including 4,200 officers (150 of them being general officers), were relieved of their duties following the coup attempt. The most drastic purges affected the Special Forces and the pilot corps to such an extent that the Turkish Air Force is now probably the only air force in the world that has more aircraft than pilots (with a ratio of 0.7 pilot per plane, less than half of the international minimum standard of 1.5).

The recent constitutional reform also involved a drastic change of the country's civil-military balance of power. Both the Gendarmerie and Coast Guard were demilitarised and are now under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. Similarly, several military hospitals, harbours, and industrial sites are now subject to civil administration. Moreover, the number of civilian members of both the National Security Council and Supreme Military Council (which is, inter alia, responsible for appointing general officers) was considerably increased. From now on, the president sovereignly appoints the chief of the general staff, who is under Erdoğan's direct authority. The other service branches are now under the command of the minister of Defence, but both the president and prime minister can give direct orders to the service branches. Although the position of Chief of the General Staff was structurally weakened, Erdoğan has excellent relations with this high-ranking officer, General Hulusi Akar, who is loyal to the AKP. The new army commanders are furthermore significantly younger in terms of years of experience, which helps General Akar to establish his authority. As a result, the decade-long danger of a military coup in Turkey is now lower than it has ever been before. Paradoxically, internal divisions are plaguing more than ever the TAF – especially among the officer corps. In the short term, Erdoğan is and will be safe, at least as long as he remains in power. However, as soon as the AKP loses its parliamentary majority (and the army still comprises officers that are loyal to the AKP), the spectre of a military coup will loom again.

As of now, the training of officers is under civilian control too. For example, a number of military academies have been incorporated into the National Defense University, which is led by a civilian rector. The TAF were the guardian of the secular nature of the state according to the old constitution, but this "rule" was also thoroughly reviewed. Nowadays, military instruction is also accessible to graduates of the religious Imam Hatip schools as well as to women wearing a headscarf, which would have been unthinkable not so long ago. Numerous officer cadets would even have been recruited on the direct recommendation of AKP members. Moreover, in September 2017, the decision was taken that Chopin's *Funeral March* would no longer be played for military funerals, but the Ottoman *Segah Tekbir*, in which passages from the Quran are recited.

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Many officers who are pro-AKP have in the meantime made a flash career within the TAF, which could affect the quality of the command capabilities as well as the new members of the severely hit Special Forces and pilot corps, who cannot be reconstituted and trained in two shakes. Yet the TAF continue to execute military operations along the Turkish borders with Syria and Iraq, and in the southeastern provinces (mainly inhabited by Kurds). Although these operations have not all resulted in military triumphs, the TAF's combat effectiveness would not have been structurally reduced despite all that has happened. On the contrary, the operation Euphrates Shield in the northern part of Syria – launched in September 2016 – boosted again the morale of the troops after the humiliation of July 2016. The timing of this operation suggests besides that boosting the morale was one of the motives for that operation.

However, the long-term implications of all these purges are less obvious. Ever since 2002 – when the AKP won a parliamentary majority for the first time – the TAF have been facing trials over the existence of an alleged secret society of high-ranking militaries and intellectuals (the organisation "Ergenekon") and ditto plans for a coup ("operation Balyoz"). This called for a traumatic period for the TAF and there is a real danger that these major reforms are to create more ideological and political antagonisms between the Turkish officers. The current political appointments of high-ranking officers, for instance, go against a long-established meritocratic tradition within the TAF. In August 2017, seven generals were dismissed and replaced by pro-AKP sympathisers with hardly any military experience.

Many of the dismissed officers were both pro-Western and pro-NATO. In the meantime, they have been largely replaced by AKP supporters who, in terms of external and security policy, have an affinity with Russia, Iran, India, and China. For many years, the Turkish class of officers has appeared to be a sort of state within the state. The profile of these officers was usually rather European and secular, but as headscarf-wearing women and graduates of the Imam Hatip schools can enter the National Defense University these days, a career as officer is now accessible to whole new segments of Turkish society. On the one hand, this has the advantage of bridging the traditional gap between the elitist class of officers and Turkish society. On the other hand, the current reform of the TAF also implies the politicisation of the entire military class, into which AKP loyalists are more and more admitted. As the traditionally secular ethos and the Kemalist identity of officers are undermined, an internal power struggle can be expected.

Ultimately, there is no indication that a structural improvement of the civil-military relations in Turkey can be expected with regard to democracy. Obviously, the Kemalist ideology (and party) was not bound to be eternal, but this can equally apply to the AKP, with an internal struggle between factions being inevitable. It should be noted that the Turkish parliament still has no control whatsoever over military policy and it is very unlikely that there will be more transparency in Turkey's defence policy, let alone opportunities for some public debate on security and defence. Civilians in the National Security Council or Supreme Military Council are actually no civil servants or parliamentarians, but governmental representatives. In other words, even after the current reforms, the TAF will not be accountable to the public, not even through its representatives or the press. Although the TAF were previously a kind of (unelected and obscure) state within the state, that old democratic deficit is now being swapped for a new democratic deficit. As a matter of fact, the TAF are being transformed into an AKP-loyal organisation, regardless of future election results.

## **What has Turkey to offer us as a NATO ally?**

The Turkish NATO membership has not been questioned yet<sup>iv</sup>; still it is unclear what this membership concretely involves nowadays. NATO is traditionally silent on the internal political developments that unfold within a member state. The North Atlantic Treaty, including its security provisions referred to in Article 5, is still the guiding principle. For this reason, speculating on the impact of the political developments in Turkey on the implementation of these provisions is premature.

As the second largest standing military force in NATO, the TAF have as much active personnel as the armed forces of the United Kingdom and France together. More importantly, NATO has taken a keen interest in the geographical location of Turkey for many years, especially in the Diyarbakir and Incirlik air bases, which have been major operational bases in the Middle East for Western military forces since the Gulf War in 1990-1991.

However, Turkey's main asset as a NATO ally is perhaps the fact that it is a large and important Muslim country, forming a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, connecting West and East. It can be considered as a cultural, economic, geopolitical, and strategic bridge in the field of security.

NATO should be able to rely on this bridge in order to safeguard its interests in an optimal way, temper the increasing anti-Western sentiment, and understand the sensitivities in the Middle East. Actually, the current developments show that an anti-Western mood is prevailing in Turkey. There is a strong feeling of resentment towards the West in the Muslim world, which is often the consequence of both a past that has not been forgiven and forgotten and the present-day perpetuation of all kinds of clichés. Numerous peoples of the Middle East came into contact with Western civilisation for the first time during the Crusades and with democracy during the colonial period. The ideals of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* left them with a particularly bitter aftertaste, as if we were to treat Muslims as free and equal brothers. We have turned the page, but as long as the Palestinian question remains pending, many Muslims are not inclined to draw a line under the colonial period. For example, the 2003 invasion of Iraq reinforced the Muslim perception of a Western crusade.<sup>v</sup>

One of the decisions taken at the NATO Summit in Istanbul (in 2004) involved the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in committing itself to fighting terrorism. In that respect, it should be avoided at all costs that NATO is perceived as fighting Islam, as having a Muslim ally is a crucial asset in the current geopolitical situation.<sup>vi</sup>

Erdogan is not the type of ruler who acts in the spirit of freedom and democracy, as advocated in the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty, but it is not impossible that he will be succeeded by a more moderate president one day (as we have already seen in Iran for instance). Actually, the democratic policies of a number of other NATO allies also raise questions. For this reason, it is necessary to think twice before turning one's back on a NATO ally whenever a government in power is inclined to overstep the boundaries of democracy.

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NATO can and should not betray its own principles by accepting anything from its member states, but lacks the means to bring questionable allies back on the right track. However, if the other allies look away when real terrorism hits Turkey or when the Turkish parliament is being bombed, we somehow push Erdoğan into anti-Western arms. It should be remembered that Erdoğan used to advocate secularism in the Arab world and that, in those days, he indeed made impressive efforts to bring his country into line with the European Union.

Whoever thinks that, on the basis of Erdoğan's policy, NATO could do without Turkey, should realise the possible further logical consequences; the Russians would just be delighted, whereas the Alliance would not only lose a powerful military ally, but also have to face an additional Muslim opponent.

Eventually, the US Congress and the European Union are in a better position to respond appropriately to Erdoğan. They are, after all, political institutions that have a much broader and effective range of means of pressure than NATO, which is much more a military *hard power* organisation.

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<sup>i</sup> Lungescu Oana, NATO Spokesperson's statement on Turkey, NATO Press Release 132, issued on 10 August 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Stoltenberg Jens, Statement by the NATO Secretary General on the first anniversary of the coup attempt in Turkey, NATO Press Release 122, issued on 15 July 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab (actually holding four citizenships), who was arrested in the United States for evading sanctions on Iran, laundering money and being a member of international criminal organisation, appears to have ties with Turkish government officials and, possibly, Erdoğan himself.

<sup>iv</sup> By the way, the North Atlantic Treaty does not provide for the exclusion of a Treaty partner; only for an enlargement (Art. 10) as well as a voluntary cessation of partnership (Art. 13).

<sup>v</sup> Earlier, for the invasion of Afghanistan, President George W. Bush referred literally to his *war on terror* as a crusade: "This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while" (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>).

<sup>vi</sup> Strictly speaking, Albania is also a NATO ally with a mostly Muslim population, but that country is incomparably outweighed by Turkey in geopolitical and military matters.

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[irsd-cesd-scvd@mil.be](mailto:irsd-cesd-scvd@mil.be).*

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