

Why Is Turkey Still In NATO?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Let's refresh our memories about how Turkey has behaved under Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

President Erdogan has repeatedly attacked the Kurds in Syria, who – whatever reservations some may have about them – have been our closest and most effective allies against ISIS. He has carried on a campaign of vilification against the United States for refusing to hand over Fethulleh Gulen to Erdogan's "justice." He has discharged tens of thousands of people – judges, lawyers, professors, civil servants, military officers – whom he wildly accused of being part of the failed coup in July 2016. Turkey continues to jail more journalists than any other country on earth. Erdogan has drawn closer to Putin and to Russia, and gone ahead with his pledge to buy a Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile defense system, which U.S. and NATO officials fear would lead to security breaches (for the Russians could test how the S-400 performed against NATO missiles supplied by Turkey, and tweak their defense system

accordingly). He kept the American pastor Andrew Brunson imprisoned for two years, after a Turkish court absurdly convicted Brunson, the pastor of the Izmir Resurrection Church, a tiny congregation with 25 members – and gave him a 20-year prison sentence on assorted trumped-up charges, including that of being a C.I.A. spy and a member of the Kurdish “terrorist” group, the PKK, and worst of all, of being a “Gülenist” operative. Brunson was finally freed, most begrudgingly, and only after terrific American economic pressure (threats of more boycotts and tariffs) on Ankara. Erdogan’s plan was apparently to trade Brunson for Gulen; the Americans would have none of it.

Erdogan has called the Germans “Nazis” for refusing to allow his men to campaign for votes from Turks living in Germany. When Austria shut down some Turkish-funded mosques, this led him to predict a coming war “between the crescent and the cross,” leaving no doubt as to which side Turkey would be on.

And most disturbing of all was Erdogan’s calling for a gigantic pan-Islamic force to be created that could make war on, and presumably destroy, Israel. In Erdogan’s view, all 57 members of the O.I.C. would contribute, with Turkey taking the leading role. The plan was put forth in an article published by Erdogan’s most loyal mouthpiece, the newspaper Yeni Safak.

The very detailed article included this:

What If An Army Of Islam Was Formed Against Israel?

If the OIC member states unite and form a joint military force, it will be the largest army in the world. These countries’ total population is 1,674,526,931. The number of soldiers in active service in these countries is at least 5,206,100. Their [overall] military defense budget, of \$174,728,420,000 is also worthy of emphasis.

As for Israel, it is significantly inferior. The population of this country, which attempted to occupy Jerusalem while

surrounded by Muslim states, is 8,049,314. Note that the population of Istanbul alone exceeds 14 million. The number of soldiers in active service in the [Israeli] occupation forces is 160,000, and [Israel's] defense budget is approximately \$15,600,000,000.

Among the decisions that can be taken at the OIC [summit] is to form a 'Jerusalem Task Group.' In this framework, military steps are likely to be taken. The [Muslim] armies, ranging from Africa to Asia, surpass the Israeli [army in might]. So if an Islamic army is formed, Israel will be under a siege.

In a possible military operation, the first step is expected to involve 250,000 soldiers, and the establishment of joint land, air and naval bases for use in the short term. 500 tanks and armored vehicles, 100 war planes, 500 attack helicopters and 50 warships and submarines can be mobilized.

There is much more detail, all designed to show the overwhelming superiority of the 57 Muslim states to Israel in their populations, in the numbers of their soldiers, in their defense budgets, and in their combined weaponry.

After this plan was published, neither the Americans, nor any other NATO member, criticized the Turkish plan to besiege Israel from every side and – it is not stated but is surely meant – to destroy it. And Turkey remains a member of NATO, in apparent good standing.

Quaere: Why is Turkey still in NATO? Is Turkish membership of any value to other members, or is its presence a threat to the effectiveness of NATO as that organization necessarily has turned its attention away from Russia, to the greatest threat now facing the democratic West, which is the menace, both foreign and domestic, posed by 1.5 billion Muslims? Isn't Turkey's mere presence at NATO meetings likely to inhibit free discussion of what may need to be done to counter a Muslim threat? It should be clear that Turkey is no longer the

secular, Kemalist country it was before Erdogan came to power, and that the re-Islamizing of the country ensures that its loyalty is not to the West, but to fellow Muslims.

Of what conceivable benefit, militarily, is Turkish membership in NATO to its other members?

Didn't Turkey prove its unreliability when it prevented the Americans from using the Incirlik base to invade Iraq from the north in 2003? In any war between NATO and a Muslim country – say Iran – how likely is it that Turkey would allow its airspace or bases on its soil to be used by NATO forces, much less contribute troops to a coalition of NATO military forces?

President Erdogan and his senior officials have repeatedly threatened Europe that unless it does Turkey's bidding – and stops criticizing its policies (including sending troops into Syrian Kurdish areas), "We will open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your way."

Then there is the matter of hydrocarbons in the eastern Mediterranean. Ankara has threatened to take naval military action against those who oppose its exploitation of deposits of natural gas that are on the Greek side of Cyprus, and thus outside Turkey's territorial waters. In October, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned Turkey not to engage in "illegal" and "unacceptable" drilling off Cyprus. "We've made clear that operations in international waters are governed by a set of rules. We've told the Turks that illegal drilling is unacceptable and we'll continue to take diplomatic actions to ... ensure that lawful activity takes place," he said. "No country can hold Europe hostage." But Turkey hasn't stopped its drilling plans in the waters off the Greek part of Cyprus. And holding Europe hostage is exactly what Turkey does, by repeatedly warning of those 3.6 million Syrians it can let loose into the continent at any time.

Turkey also threatens to "kick out the American troops from

two critical military bases in Incirlik and Malatya.” This would be a major blow from a supposed NATO ally. The Turkish journalist Burak Bekdil notes that “The US nuclear warheads at Incirlik have remained at the disposition of the US military under a special US-Turkish treaty. The early warning radars stationed at the Malatya base, which are linked to the US Aegis system (deployed in the Mediterranean), provide a shield for Israel against any air or missile attack.” But that is all the more reason for Erdogan to want to close down the Malatya base, and shut off those radars; Erdogan is not about to help America help Israel.

In 2010, Erdogan claimed that Israel is “the principal threat to peace” in the Middle East. Not al-Qaeda, not the Islamic State, not Hezbollah, not Hamas, not Islamic Jihad, not the Muslim Brotherhood, but Israel, that has been fighting only defensive wars imposed on it by Arab states and terrorist groups ever since 1948.

And now we come to the killing of ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi. President Trump thanked Turkey for its assistance; it came second on his list, just after Russia, and the Kurds came last. But Turkey – like Russia – did nothing to help the Americans. One report said, lamely, that possibly Turkey’s contribution may have been to let the Americans fly over its territory. But if one looks at the flight plan of the planes coming from a base near Erbil, Iraq, they at no point flew over Turkish air space. There seems to have been absolutely no contribution by Turkey to the locating and killing of Al-Baghdadi. In fact, as Brett McGurk, who had been the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Turkey has “a lot of explaining to do.” How is it that Baghdadi managed to hide out just a few kilometers from the Turkish border, an area bristling with Turkish military outposts and troops? It strains credulity to believe that the Turks did not know where Al-Baghdadi was. It was the Syrian Kurds, Turkey’s enemies, who tracked Al-Baghdadi for months to

his final lair. They ought to have been thanked first, not last, by President Trump. And Turkey need not have been thanked at all.

Turkey has never been interested in fighting ISIS. It was no secret that Turkey allowed ISIS fighters to cross freely into Syria from Turkey, no doubt because it preferred ISIS to the Syrian Kurds ISIS was fighting. And Turkey allowed wounded ISIS members to be treated at Turkish hospitals and then, instead of detaining them, let them return to the Islamic State.

As the veteran Middle East correspondent Trudy Rubin has noted:

Baghdadi was found, not in ISIS's traditional area of eastern Turkey, but far away in western Syria, near the Turkish border and Turkish military outposts. This suggests that Turkish military intelligence knew Baghdadi's location and didn't share it.

Clearly, the U.S. military distrusted Ankara. They chose to launch the Baghdadi operation from hundreds of miles away in Iraq, rather than from nearby Turkey (a NATO partner), and reportedly they gave Turkey no advance notice. Yet Trump singled this ISIS enabler out for thanks, just the same.

There was no need to single out Turkey for its nonexistent help in locating al-Baghdadi. Some may assume that Turkey was “secretly” giving help that cannot be disclosed. But there was no help. The Kurds were the ones who helped us track Erdogan to his last redoubt, close to the Turkish border where he felt safe. And if the Pentagon so distrusted Turkey that it chose to launch the raid not from the base at Incirlik, but from Erbil, Iraq, and did not give the Turks advance warning because it feared Erdogan might alert Al-Baghdadi, that tells us everything we need to know about how our military views this NATO “ally.”

Shouldn't all this matter? Erdogan's attempts to hold an American pastor hostage to exchange for Fethulleh Gulen, his mass jailing of political opponents and journalists, his threats to shut down two American bases at Incirlik and Malatya, his claim that Israel is "the principal threat to peace in the Middle East," his detailed plans for a pan-Islamic force to destroy Israel, his constant invective against Europe, as when he called the Germans "Nazis" for refusing to allow his men to campaign for votes from Turks living in Germany, and when Austria shut down some Turkish-funded mosques, he predicted a coming war "between the crescent and the cross," leaving no doubt as to which side he would be on.

Whenever the Europeans criticize Erdogan, he threatens that he can let loose "let 3.6 million refugees to flood Europe." He is determined to lift hydrocarbons from the territorial waters off of the Greek part of Cyprus, in defiance of Secretary Pompeo's warning not to do so. Turkey has allowed ISIS members to cross freely from Turkey into Syria, and has supplied medical assistance to ISIS members. The latest outrage emerges from what we now know about where Al-Baghdadi was hiding, a few miles from the Turkish border, in an area full of Turkish troops and military intelligence. There is in the Pentagon the strong suspicion that the Turks knew the general location, though perhaps not the exact town, where Al-Baghdadi was hiding. All this bespeaks not an ally – much less a NATO ally that deserves our protection – but an enemy.

Why is Turkey still in NATO? This question becomes harder to answer with every passing day.

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