

# Erdogan: “What kind of NATO membership is this? What kind of NATO alliance is this?”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who always likes to tell us what he really thinks, is at it again. Last year he accused the people of Germany – and of the Netherlands too – of being “Nazis” for not allowing political rallies targeted at Turkish residents in Germany. He also called Angela Merkel guilty of “Nazism” for suggesting that the EU reconsider its relationship with Turkey – i.e., possibly end the talks about Turkish accession to the group. “What happened is Nazism,” said Erdogan in response. “What happened is fascism.” And the Germans were called “Nazis” yet again because, according to Erdogan, they refused Turkish requests for help in suppressing Kurdish separatists that had been made, he preposterously claimed, 4,500 times. “Mrs Merkel, you are supporting terrorists,” he said. And now he [threatens to deliver an “Ottoman slap”](#) to the Americans if they continue to fund the Kurdish YPG (People’s

Protection Unit) in Syria. But that's only the latest of many threats he's made about the YPG.

In January, he accused the U.S of supporting "an army of terror" because it wants the Kurdish fighters of the YPG in northeastern Syria, who proved to be the most effective force against ISIS, to be a major component of the border forces guarding the frontier between Syria and Turkey. They would be there as well to help suppress any possible resurgence of ISIS. For Erdogan, any Kurdish group anywhere could help the Kurdish separatists inside Turkey, and has to be suppressed. For Erdogan, all Kurds are "terrorists" – it doesn't matter that the Syrian Kurds were the best fighters against the most dangerous of real terrorists, those of ISIS. And in his view, if his attack on the Syrian Kurds goes directly against American policy – well, Erdogan doesn't give a fig for the Americans. His forces have been let loose on the Kurds in Syria; this occurred after the Americans had made clear they wanted 30,000 Syrian Kurdish troops to guard the Syria-Turkey border. To mark the moment when the Turkish forces moved into Syria to attack the Kurds directly, worshippers in 90,000 mosques in Turkey prayed the Surah al-Fath, the 48th chapter of the Qur'an, in which those engaged in Jihad are promised material rewards taken from those they defeat; the Speaker of the Turkish Parliament called the Turkish attack on the Kurds in Afrin a "jihad." In Erdogan's orchestra, no one sounds a secular Kemalist note.

And then, taking things to a still higher level of hostility, Erdogan's men promised that American troops in Syria may be hit. "Accusing the US fighters of wearing 'terrorists' clothes' (i.e, YPG uniforms) that may be hard to distinguish, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag warned that anyone fighting alongside the Kurds 'is our target.'"

He added that "there is no chance that we will make a distinction at this point" between the Kurds and the US fighters.

He might have said something else. He might have said that “we will do our best to avoid hitting American fighters. It is certainly going to be difficult. Nonetheless, we will try.” A different tone, a different emphasis. But instead, he – and his boss Erdogan – wanted to be as tough as possible on the Americans. This is not the behavior one expects from a NATO ally.

After that warning, the commander of American troops in Syria, Lieutenant General Paul Funk, speaking in Manbij, a city that the YPG holds and that the Turks now threaten to invade, issued his own warning to Erdogan:

**“You hit us, we will respond aggressively. We will defend ourselves,”** the U.S. commander, Lieutenant General Paul Funk, said in a direct warning to Turkey in the interview published on Feb. 7.

Then, an enraged Erdogan came back on February 13 with his “Ottoman slap” remark.

“It’s obvious that those who say, ‘If you hit us, we’ll hit back hard,’ have never in their lives gotten an Ottoman slap,” President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a speech at parliament on Tuesday [February 13] responding to remarks by the top U.S. commander in Syria to the *New York Times*. “If those who come and go as they like through Turkey think they’re going to go stirring things up in places without paying for it, they’ll soon see that’s not the case.” (He is referring to American forces using the air base at Incirlik.)

The comments mark an escalation in rhetoric against the U.S., whose backing of the Syrian Kurdish YPG has enraged Turkey, which labels the group as a terrorist organization and has invaded Syria to combat it. That incursion has created an unprecedented military face-off between the two largest armies in NATO, with U.S. forces fighting alongside the YPG while Turkey attacks it, first in Afrin and soon, if we are to

believe its threats, in Manbij.

How did we get here, with Turkey, the NATO member that now calls other NATO members “Nazis,” “terrorists,” and supporters of an “army of terror,” that further threatens to “target” any American troops fighting alongside Kurds in Syria, and by way of enraged reply to Lt. General Funk’s warning that if American forces are hit (by the Turks), they (the Americans) will respond in kind, warns that the Americans will get “an Ottoman slap”? Let’s consider the political trajectory of the outrageous Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In 2003, Recep Tap Erdogan was elected Prime Minister of Turkey, a post he held until 2014. In that year, he was elected President of Turkey, a post he still holds. As Prime Minister, he required that the military – the ultimate guarantor of Turkish secularism – be reined in, made subject to greater civilian control. To this end, he exploited two supposed coup attempts by the military, to gain control over the army by arresting, and putting on trial, senior officers. These two coups – “Sledgehammer” and “Ergenekon” – were both fabrications, but Erdogan cleverly exploited the fear generated by these supposed plots in order to weaken the military. When hundreds of officers were arrested and put on trial, that discouraged others, even if, in the end, those officers were all exonerated in both “Sledgehammer” and “Ergenekon.”

A real coup d’etat was attempted on July 15, 2016, when military men in Ankara and Istanbul tried to seize power (over 300 people, including fellow soldiers, died), but was quickly put down. Those involved called themselves the Peace At Home Council, and they proclaimed their anxiety over the erosion of secularism, the elimination of democratic rule, and the disregard for human rights. But few joined the original plotters, and Erdogan quickly rounded them up. He accused them of doing the bidding of Fethulleh Gulen, supposedly organizing the coup from his exile in Pennsylvania. Erdogan had more than

140,000 people detained and more than 50,000 arrested. Tens of thousands lost their jobs. No link of this abortive coup to Gulen has been proven, which has not stopped Erdogan from constantly denouncing the dark sinister forces he wants us to believe are headquartered in rural Pennsylvania. That the Americans won't hand Gulen over to him is one of his many grievances against his NATO "ally."

Erdogan has been bolstered, and so has his party, the AKP, because the Turkish economy is doing well. He has not been shy about rewarding himself. He has had built as his presidential residence the Ak Saray, or White Palace, with more than 1100 rooms, that cost \$630 million to build. Sixteen Turkish soldiers, each dressed in a costume representing a different period of Turkish history, line an interior staircase of this palace. It is clear that Erdogan dreams of rivaling the Ottoman despots. He is well on his way, having outsmarted the army and outmaneuvered his civilian opponents.

Erdogan has also been busy re-islamizing secularist Turkey. Here are some of the things he has managed to accomplish, taking care not to trigger a military coup, both while Mayor of Istanbul and as Prime Minister:

1. Between 2002 and 2013, the Turkish government built 17,000 new mosques. Many more have been built since, and more still are now being planned. In addition, thousands of Ottoman-era mosques have been repaired and refurbished. Erdogan is building a gigantic mosque on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, which can accommodate 30,000 worshippers.

2. When Erdogan first came to power, women working in the public sector were still banned from wearing the hijab, including teachers, lawyers, parliamentarians and others working in state-run institutions. In recent years, the Justice and Development Party has lifted bans on wearing the hijab in schools and all state institutions. Now those teachers, lawyers, parliamentarians are not merely allowed,

but encouraged, to wear the hijab by the AKP. Even female ministers and judges have taken to wearing hijabs. The wives of Erdogan, Gul (the former president of Turkey), and other ministers all appear in public ostentatiously hijabbed.

3. After traditional madrasas were banned by Ataturk, Imam-Hatip schools were set up to take their place. These are vocational education institutions designed to provide religious education and train imams, but now offering a regular academic curriculum as well, open to students who are not training to be imams. The clergy in Turkish mosques are government appointed and many imams are trained in Imam-Hatip schools.

In 2002, there were 65,000 students involved in Imam-Hatip schools. That number grew by ten times, to 658,000 in 2013, and it was recently announced that the number of Imam-Hatip students has now reached more than one million. The islamization of young minds proceeds apace.

4. Compulsory religious education in schools has been introduced. Courses on "the life of Prophet Muhammad" and "the Qur'an" have also been made mandatory.

5. The lower age-limit for taking courses on the Qur'an has been eliminated. Until now, children had to be at least 12 years old before they could attend Qur'an classes. This has been abolished by Erdogan's government, allowing Qur'an courses even for preschoolers.

6. Bans on alcohol advertising are now in place, whereas secular Turkey always allowed them. The AKP passed a bill in 2013 that banned any advertising of alcohol within 100 meters of a mosque or school.

Blurring out depictions of alcohol on television and in films has also been made mandatory.

The selling of alcohol has now been banned from student

dormitories, health institutions, sports clubs, educational institutions and gas stations. All sale of alcohol anywhere is now banned after 10pm.

7. Sharia-compliant Islamic banking has greatly expanded, and the state-owned Ziraat Islamic bank now has more than 200 branches.

At every turn, Erdogan has managed to best his perceived enemies, and to deal ruthlessly with them. There have been mass firings and arrests of military men, university professors, journalists, doctors, lawyers, even high school teachers, all ostensibly because of their roles in the attempted coup Erdogan insists was masterminded by Fethulleh Gulen. Almost 10,000 of those arrested have been military officers, including many of the highest rank. He's used the coup to crush all potential opposition. And now Erdogan seems more secure than ever in his powerful post.

What this history of Turkey in recent years makes clear is that while Ataturk's reforms once seemed to be forever, it was not Kemalism, but rather its nemesis, Islam, that appears to be prevailing, under the relentlessly re-islamizing despot Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Right now he has completely cowed his secularist opposition. He has dealt with his opposition as ruthlessly as Vladimir Putin has dealt with his.

Turkey has always been held up in the West as an example of a Muslim country that could successfully tame Islam, limit its role in society and politics, and make possible the modernization, through systematic secularisation, of the country in every important respect. That's how Turkey appeared to be going for more than seventy years, in the direction Ataturk had set, until Erbakan and, much more thoroughly, Erdogan and his AKP party, arrived on the scene to re-escort Islam back onto the center of the Turkish stage. There is no moral in tow, no lesson to be derived here, other than recognizing that the secularists grew too confident and

complacent, having come to believe that after 70 years, Kemalism would remain forever. They ceased to watch like a hawk the forces of a newly-invigorated Islam, and assumed that the army would always step in if the forces of secularism were threatened. They did not realize how wily and dangerous Erdogan, the despot who became the standard-bearer of Turkey's re-islamization, would turn out to be. Erdogan used the Turkish application for membership in the E.U., and the stringent human-rights requirements the country now had to meet to be considered for such membership, to weaken the Turkish military, which for 70 years had been the final guarantor of Kemalism.

Under new legislation, Erdogan could remain as President until 2029. But not everyone in Turkey is delighted with his despotic rule, nor reconciled to his incessant promotion of Islam. The secularists no longer can count on an army coup to protect them, as happened in decades past. Though they have been silenced for now, they still exist in large numbers. They can do little but bide their time. Should Erdogan overreach and stumble as self-made sultan, as could well happen, either from a military humiliation at the hands of the Syrian Kurds or, in an act of enormous folly, by taking on the Americans in Syria, delivering an "Ottoman slap" that would be returned tenfold, his popularity would suffer. His grandiose neo-Ottoman visions would now be seen as absurd, and he could become an object of amusement, no longer feared, and once such a figure receives his comeuppance, he cannot recover.

Should that happen, the secularists might manage to return to power, backed by a newly-chastened and much more wary military. The Turkish secularists, one hopes, will not repeat their previous mistakes. They took Kemalism too much for granted, and their complacency gave the wily Erdogan the opening, and time, he needed to begin to re-islamize much of Turkish society. The secularists should hold fast to the example of Ataturk, who patiently, and systematically,



outmaneuvered those who opposed his reforms, in order to make sure that, should Erdogan finally lose his grip, his successor will be from the Kemalist camp. And the job of protecting Kemalism should not be a task left to the military alone, as happened in the past, but it must become the duty of every Turkish secularist, civilian and military, both to explain and to defend the legacy of Ataturk.

Right now, Turkish forces are attacking the very Kurds whom the American military has for several years supported with weapons and training, and who showed their mettle in the war against ISIS. Turkey's military officials claimed within the first few days of their attack on the YPG in mid-January that their warplanes had struck 108 out of a total of 113 Syrian Kurdish militia targets in the Farina region, including a military airport. But after those initial strikes, the Turkish military have gotten bogged down. The town of Afrin itself (in the canton of Afrin) has been under artillery fire and attack from all sides, since January 19. Erdogan originally promised that Turkish forces in Syria will "vanquish" the Kurdish militia, and that he would "strangle" the American-backed Kurdish force "before it's even born." But almost a month into the conflict, those Kurdish forces have not been either vanquished or strangled, and they are still holding the city of Afrin, and the war goes on. The news reports describe Turkey as "America's NATO ally." This is misleading. Turkey is "a fellow member of NATO," but over the last few years has been ever less of an American ally, and now the Erdogan regime has made Turkey into America's foe.

It is the Kurds, not Erdogan's Turks, who are the natural allies of the Americans. They showed it in Syria, fighting so effectively, while coordinating with the Americans, against ISIS. They showed it too in Iraq, where American soldiers were startled by the contrast between Kurds and Arabs. The openly pro-American Kurds remained deeply grateful for the air cover the Americans had provided them from 1991 on, preventing

Saddam from continuing his genocidal campaign – “Operation Anfal” – against the Kurds. The Iraqi Arabs, on the other hand, both Sunni and Shi’a, remained hostile to the Americans, despite the latter having removed a monstrous dictator and his terrifying regime. American soldiers took their R-and-R in Iraqi Kurdistan, for their commanders knew they would be safe there; to this day, there has not been a single terrorist attack against the Americans in Iraqi Kurdistan. Were the Kurds to attain an independent Kurdistan, beginning with Rojava in northeastern Syria, that new polity could potentially lead to the adhesion of the six million Iraqi Kurds, 93% of whom voted for independence in the referendum held in September 2017. Then there are the six million Iranian Kurds, whose desire to join an independent Kurdistan would naturally increase if that Kurdistan were not a mere vision, but became a reality, with eight million Kurds (two million from Syria, six million from Iraq) and the land they live on.

The Iranian military would try to crush its own Kurds from seceding. But it will be harder now to suppress Iran’s Kurds than ever before. Iran’s military is now involved simultaneously in several theaters of war. In Yemen, Iran is fighting, through its Houthi proxies, the Saudis, whose bombing campaign continues without cease. In Lebanon, the Shi’a Hezbollah are another proxy of Tehran that receive money and weapons from Iran. In Syria, Iran is now fighting Israel, both through Hezbollah and Assad’s army, and increasingly, taking on Israel directly, as with the Iranian drone intrusion into Israel that triggered the recent deadly attack by the Israeli air force, not just on Syrian air defenses, but on Iranian bases in Syria. Iran, in other words, is already engaged on several fronts, and as a consequence would find it very difficult to permanently subjugate six million Iranian Kurds should they attempt to secede. An independent Kurdish state, carved out of Kurdish areas in both Syria and Iraq, has a better chance than ever to become reality, given the military and political weaknesses of the regimes in Damascus

and Baghdad. Such a state could supply weapons and volunteers to Iranian Kurds – weapons that might be provided, too, by the United States or Israel, neither of which wishes Iran well and would welcome the chance to weaken it from within.

Erdogan, of course, does not want any Kurds, anywhere, to enjoy self-determination. In his worldview, that's to be invoked only for "Palestinians." What he sees as Turkey's national interests flatly contradict those of the United States. Now it is time to look steadily and whole at Erdogan and not allow Turkey's membership in NATO to give it a pass. With his mass roundup of 60,000 political opponents, and his imprisonment of journalists – Turkey has jailed more journalists than any other country in the world – Erdogan has given conclusive evidence that he is no democrat. Real democracy is about more than elections. It's also about not jailing your opponents, it's about allowing a free press. Erdogan fails on both counts. Real democracy is exactly what NATO was formed in 1949 to defend, against the Soviet Union. Turkey was a democracy when, in 1952, it was admitted to NATO. But it is no longer a democracy in the Western sense, even if it holds elections. Erdogan, ensconced in the 1100-room palace he has had built for himself, having jailed thousands of his political opponents and with many honest journalists still jailed, is no democrat, but a new Sultan. Continued Turkish membership in NATO – even without Erdogan's unhinged verbal attacks on several NATO members and his threats to deliver an "Ottoman slap" to the Americans – becomes ever more grotesque, for his despotic rule violates both the letter and spirit of NATO membership.

How valuable has Erdogan's Turkey been as a NATO ally? Turkey did not permit the American military to use the Incirlik air base in the way it wanted to during the second Iraq war. Erdogan has consistently denounced Israel, which, though not a member of NATO, is certainly a key American ally in every sense – both a Western democracy, and a powerful military

ally. Erdogan has seemingly gone out of his way to ruin the former good relations Turkey had with Israel, beginning with his furious public attack on Shimon Peres at Davos, his hysterical reaction to the Mavi Marmara incident, his accusing Israel of having indiscriminately massacred innocent babies and children during its war with Hamas in Gaza, and declaring that "it isn't anti-Semitism to criticize an administration that massacres, kills babies, children, innocent babies, children, in their homes, mosques, hospitals, schools, beaches, parks, without any discrimination." He has been a constant defender of Hamas, which he has described as "not a terrorist organization," has praised the Muslim Brotherhood, and has made himself the primary champion, even more than any Arab state, of the "Palestinians." There is evidence that, back in 2006, Turkey may even have allowed Iran to move weapons through its territory to Hezbollah. He was the most vocal opponent of Trump's Jerusalem Embassy move. Erdogan has, as one prominent Turkish exile put it, a "conspiratorial antisemitic worldview." He's accused Israel of "keeping Hitler's spirit alive." Pro-Erdogan journalists repeatedly describe Erdogan's arch-enemy Fethulleh Gulen in antisemitic terms: "Fethullah Gülen is sharp witted. He quickly smells of money and power. Because he is a Jew. That's the reason he loves Israel almost to the point of sickness," Sabah columnist Erin Ramo?lu wrote in December 2016, "...where his cunning comes from, why the CIA has gotten hold of him and his love of Israel can be understood from the family of this clown [Fethulleh Gulen]." Erdogan has not distanced himself from any of this.

A despot and an antisemite, full of resentment against America, Israel, and Europe, Erdogan has no business being in NATO.

What should the Americans do now? The American government could make sure that Erdogan understands that any attack by Turkish forces in Syria that injures or kills even a single

American soldier will be met by an overwhelming military response, akin to that which the Israelis just inflicted on the Syrian air defenses and Iranian bases in Syria. But that's only one part of the response.

The Americans can end the farce of Turkey's membership in NATO. They should call for an extraordinary meeting of NATO to discuss the behavior of this new, anti-kemalist, islamizing, despotic, anti-Western Turkey. The bill of particulars should include the fact that Turkey, alone among NATO members, has authoritarian rule rather than democracy; that Erdogan has refused to cooperate militarily with a NATO ally, when he denied the American military the use of the Incirlik air base just before the Iraq war; that he has accused Israel of "keeping Hitler's spirit alive" while he has found nothing wrong in defending "Palestinian" terrorists; that he has jailed 60,000 political opponents, shut down 187 media outlets, forced 2,500 journalists to lose their jobs, imprisoned another 150 journalists whom he describes as "terrorists"; that he has called fellow members of NATO – Germany and the Netherlands – "Nazis" and, in his latest outrage, he is now attempting to destroy a military force, the Kurdish YPG, that for years has been the closest military ally in Syria of the Americans.

For Erdogan, that malignant but unturbanned Turk, all Kurds are terrorists, no matter whom they have been fighting or what they have accomplished. He doesn't like the fact that the American government refuses to abandon its Kurdish allies in Syria, who were the best domestic fighters against ISIS and whom the Americans see as providing the most effective security even now on the Syrian-Turkish border. And to warnings from Washington to stop attacking the Syrian Kurds, he asks **"What kind of NATO membership is this? What kind of NATO alliance is this?"**

Those are exactly the right questions, but Recep Tayyip Erdogan is exactly the wrong person to be asking them.

NATO membership is not a right but a privilege. It's a privilege that Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made sure he, and Turkey, do not deserve.

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