

Turkey: Ally or Albatross?

by G. Murphy Donovan



In April, I wrote a [piece](#) for the *Small Wars Journal*, “Why We Lose,” that recommended some new initiatives that might change the vectors of foreign policy under the Trump administration. The principal recommendation for NATO reform was to expel Turkey, recognize Kurdistan, and end Ankara’s pipe dream of accession to the European Union. Reform in Brussels is more pressing than any expansion of NATO, or the EU, for reasons that should be obvious by now.

Open door policies, sponsored by Germany, have proved to be cultural and security disasters for Europe. A closer embrace of Turkey can only accelerate pernicious migration, the spread of terror, and the Islamization of Europe.

The argument against Turkey is clear enough. Plainly put, Erdogan’s Turkey is not Ataturk’s Turkey. Like Iran, Turkish politicians have cast their lot with religious zealots, not secular freedom. The moral and political tenants of European secular democracies and so-called “democratic” Islamic theocracies are fundamentally irreconcilable. Regimes run by priests or religious political parties are a threat to global and domestic comity.

Instability in the Levant was guaranteed when two formerly secular governments in Teheran and Ankara succumbed to their

worst religious instincts. The religious revolution in Shia Iran (1979), not the secular Sunni “Arab Spring,” was probably the turning point of modern *Ummah* history. Unfortunately, the turn was a quick march to the rear.

Theocracy is the default setting for failed Muslim states these days. The historical and long festering Sunni/Shia divide is also institutionalized now in several nation states with formidable conventional and nuclear capabilities.

The Islam bomb that arrived through the back door in Sunni Pakistan is now knocking on the front door in Shia Iran. Given the respective religious demographics, the only way that the Shia can level the sectarian playing field is to acquire the bomb. When Iran goes nuclear, the pressure on neighboring majority Sunni states will be immense, starting with Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Erdogan has systematically purged and proscribed any meaningful opposition including the military, [Gulenists](#), and all Kurdish political parties. These depredations are the toxic icing on a history and tradition of political repression and denial that includes the Armenian genocide.

Holocaust [denial](#) alone should disqualify any Islamic nation, like Turkey, from membership in any transnational forum, especially military alliances with the democratic West.

A realistic threat appraisal of Turkey today would see Erdogan’s Ankara as an Islamic Trojan Horse. Turkey has been moving back not forward since Erdogan’s accession. Secular democracy is not trending in either the Shia or Sunni worlds.

I received a very thoughtful response to my original *SWJ* argument about Turkey from a former National Security Agency colleague which is reproduced here verbatim.

“Turkey has an imperial history of strong-armed leadership

stretching back centuries. It's their way, but I think we should be able to deal with it. As far as their role in NATO, I see some important positives for retaining Turkey that seem to get overlooked;

1. Turkey enforces the Montreux Convention (something in which the US was too blind to participate) which critically hampers the Russian Black Sea Fleet from establishing and maintaining any SLOCs in the Med. Fifty-sixty years ago, the Soviets tried to maintain ports in Tartus (Syria), Aden (Yemen) and Dahlak Islands (was Ethiopia now Eritrea) but failed. They could not sustain any meaningful assistance to their clients even with using aviation assets to augment support. It's just too hard to do with the Turkish Bosphorus and Montreux constricting ship movements.

2. Turkish SIGINT sites (some of which were once ours before NSA scaled back) provide NATO intelligence collection on the region, e.g., ISIS, Iran, Iraq, and including looking into the interior of Russia (e.g., think intel on CENTER-2015, the largest Russian field exercise since ZAPAD-81). As sexy as satellite intelligence collection may be, there are still some unique abilities from ground sites that make them valuable.

3. Turkish missile radar sites in Eastern Turkey near the Iranian border are the only regional sites that provide early warning of Iranian missile launches; and this supports Israel as well as NATO.

4. The Turks are building a new passage around Istanbul which will allow for LNG to pass into the Black Sea to the Ukrainian re-gasification facilities being constructed at Yuzhnyi (Odessa region). This is an energy development of a strategic nature for the Black Sea economies (Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine)."

Each of the above arguments for alliance with Turkey is valid

if America was at, or about to go to, war with Russia or Iran. Turkey was an asset in the Cold War. She is less of an asset, more of a liability, in the hot war with various Sunni factions. Turkey now literally [blackmails](#) the EU with threats of increased Islamic migrants and embedded terrorists.

The idea that Brussels should treat Turkey like any other EU applicant was always a stretch. NATO accession was a mistake, a dangerous gamble at best and now a threat realized. Given a choice between democratic norms and Islamic recidivism, Turkey has voted for the later.

The argument for Turkey as an ally comes down to base rights today, a tactical consideration at best in the era of near-earth surveillance. Still, an artifact of the Cold War now plays obstructionist in America's many hot wars.

Turkey works both sides of the small wars street. Ankara facilitates the [movement](#) of terrorists in and out of the Levant. Turkey also enables the financing of global ISIS with a black market oil [racket](#) that involves Erdogan family members. Ankara also runs military operations [against](#) the Kurds inside of Turkey and across borders in Iraq and Syria. None of this bodes well for peace in the Middle East any time soon.

Throughout, America seeks leverage by playing both ends against the middle of Shia/Sunni divide, attempting to placate Persia, Turkey, and Arabia. Erdogan was feted in Washington recently.

The lynchpin for any new thinking about the Levant may be Kurdistan. In the entire Muslim world, the Kurds come as close to enlightened civility as any. Indeed, women have equal rights across the board and, unlike most of the Islamic world; other religions are treated with dignity and respect. Surely, Kurdish fighters have done more to rescue Christians from modern Sunni depredations than the Vatican or any so-called

Christian nation in the West.



Historically, American policy towards the Kurds is laundered in a Turkish bazaar. We dare not offend the Ottomans. Every US administration pays lip service to Kurdish heroism but does little to reward their fealty.

After WWI, the Kurdish nation was [recognized](#) by the Treaty of Sevres (1920) and then the rug was pulled from beneath statehood by Turkish obstructionists in 1923. More recently, Kurd political parties and freedom fighters were added to American terror list to placate Ankara. The truth about Kurdish fighters is that they only pose a threat to duplicitous Turks and genocidal Sunnis like ISIS.

If a new day is ever to begin with Islam, Kurdistan might be the light at the end of that tunnel. America could put a shot across the Islamist bow by striking the Kurds from the US State Department's terror list and treating Kurdistan like the nation it should become.

Reform is the only tonic that will refresh Islam. Let it begin with secular Islam, the Kurdish enlightenment.

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