

Why Turkey Should Be Expelled From NATO (Reason #876)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced in mid-December that a new Turkish offensive in northern Syria would target Kurdish forces, in order to push them back from the Syrian-Turkish border. This was not a surprise. For years, Erdogan has shown more interest in fighting the Kurds in Syria than in fighting ISIS. In fact, in fighting the Kurds, he has been helping ISIS, for those same Kurds have proven to be the most effective fighting force against ISIS in Syria, just as Iraqi Kurds have been the most effective force against ISIS fighters in Mosul and surrounding areas in northern Iraq.

Erdogan does not see ISIS as the most important threat to Turkey. For Erdogan, it is the Kurds who are the main threat to the stability of the Turkish state, whether those Kurds are

in Syria, Iraq, Iran or, of course, in Turkey itself. The Kurds are about 20-25% of the population in Turkey – no one knows exactly how many Kurds there are, because the Turkish government does not publish such data. The PKK, the Kurdish Workers' Party in Turkey, which has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, is considered by Erdogan to be a "terrorist" group. Turkey used its NATO membership to gain assent from fellow members to labeling the PKK as such. Not all of those members were necessarily convinced that the PKK is a terrorist organization, but chose not to fight the combative Erdogan. The UN, however, has refused to designate the PKK as a "terrorist group." So have many countries, including Switzerland, Russia, China (PRC), Brazil, Switzerland, India and Egypt.

Turkey views the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria as a "terrorist offshoot" of the PKK. The Americans do not agree. YPG fighters in Syria have worked closely with American forces against ISIS, and have proven to be the best fighters against the Islamic State in Syria. After three months of ferocious battles, YPG fighters have helped further reduce the territory controlled by ISIS; it is now roughly 2% or less of the territory it held in 2014. And despite this tremendous victory, for which the Kurds deserve great credit, Erdogan chose that moment in mid-December to declare that his army will now drive the Kurdish forces away from the Turkish border in that part of Syria that lies east of the Euphrates.

Will the Americans allow Erdogan to do this? It certainly looks that way. President Trump has decided to pull out the 2,000 American Special Forces soldiers that had been working with the Syrian Kurds against ISIS, and had also helped guarantee Kurdish security against Erdogan's threats. But with the American troops out, what can the Kurds do? Trump clearly does not like keeping ground troops to fight these endless wars in Muslim lands. He is also going to be pulling out about half of our troops – 7,000 – from Afghanistan. But he could

also declare that while the Special Forces troops will be leaving Syria, “the American Air Force will continue to provide air cover in Syria for the Kurds, who have been our very valuable allies against Isis.” That would be a shot across the bow for Erdogan, and should make him think carefully about whether he wants to risk a possible entanglement with Washington. Trump’s very unpredictability can be usefully exploited. Erdogan can’t be sure what Trump will do next. And mention of American air cover will also help reassure the Israelis, who were initially shocked by Trump’s announced pullout of American troops, He can add something along the lines of “while ISIS has been largely – not completely – defeated, we have other enemies in Syria, and we will continue to help our ally Israel, through the use of air power, to prevent Iran from establishing bases anywhere in Syria.” The Kurds and the Israelis are the two most pro-American forces in the Middle East. The Kurds were not only our closest allies against ISIS in Syria, but also our most effective allies against ISIS in Iraq, where the Kurdish Peshmerga helped drive ISIS from Mosul, Tikrit, Tel Afar, and many other cities. And Israel remains, in the vast area between Western Europe and India, America’s most powerful and steadfast ally, and an unrivaled source of intelligence on Muslim terrorist groups.

Some may think that as a “NATO ally” Turkey – that is, Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Turkey – should be allowed to do what it wishes in pushing the Kurdish forces away from the Syrian-Turkish border, and setting up a cordon sanitaire to prevent the YPG from physically linking up with the PKK in Turkey. Why get in a fight with Turkey, that has the second largest army in NATO, over this Kurdish business? There are those, too, in the West, who have been taken in by Erdogan’s claims that all Kurdish forces are, like the PKK (as it once was, but is no longer) “terrorists,” and that includes the Syrian Kurds in the YPG. But it is hard to find any examples of terrorism committed by the YPG. One would have thought that out of

gratitude for their fighting against ISIS that the Americans would want to stand in the way of Erdogan's troops trying to get at the YPG forces. This assumes that Erdogan would not dare to attack the American military head on; if he did so, his troops would receive a humiliating defeat that would damage his status at home, and that would almost certainly be followed by a NATO meeting, called by the Americans, which would end in Turkey's being expelled from NATO. And where else can Turkey go to find allies? It is widely distrusted in the Islamic world. The Arabs have a historic memory – a most unpleasant one – of their Ottoman Turkish masters. They, and other non-Arab Muslims, also resent the neo-Ottoman dreams of Erdogan, who clearly sees himself as the potential leader of a new caliphate. His arrogance does not go over well in Cairo, or Damascus, or Baghdad, or Riyadh, or Tehran, or Islamabad.

In January 2017, Erdogan accused the U.S of supporting “an army of terror” because it wanted the Kurdish YPG fighters in northeastern Syria, who had proven their mettle, to be a major component of the border forces guarding the frontier between Syria and Turkey. They would be there mainly to help suppress any possible resurgence of ISIS in Syria. For Erdogan, any Kurdish group near the Turkish border could potentially help the Kurdish PKK separatists inside Turkey, and therefore had to be opposed. For Erdogan, all Kurds are “terrorists” – it doesn't matter to him that the Syrian Kurds have never committed a single terrorist attack, and were the best fighters against the most dangerous of real terrorists, those of ISIS. And if his attack on the Syrian Kurds went directly against American wishes, which was to have the YPG help secure the northern Syrian border – well, Erdogan was unfazed. His forces were finally let loose directly on the Syrian Kurds in January 2018, even after the Americans had repeatedly made clear they wanted 30,000 Syrian Kurdish troops to help guard the 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 proudly called the Turkish attack on the Kurds in Afrin a "jihad." In Erdogan's orchestra, no one sounds a secular Kemalist note. The Kurds were duly pushed back from the Syrian-Turkish border area west of the Euphrates. The Americans did not intervene.

And then, taking things to a still higher level of hostility, in early 2018 Erdogan's men promised that American troops in Syria might 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.

Bozdag 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 threatened 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 an interview published on Feb. 7, 2018.

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 was referring to American forces using the air base at Incirlik.)

The comments in early 2018 marked an escalation in rhetoric against the U.S., whose backing of the Syrian Kurdish YPG has always enraged Turkey. The Turkish incursion created an unprecedented military face-off between the two largest armies in NATO, with U.S. forces fighting alongside the YPG while Turkey attacked it, first in Farina and then elsewhere, including the region of Afrin. In Afrin, on the Syrian-Turkish border, the Turks not only drove out both Kurdish fighters and civilians, but also invited in Arabs from elsewhere in Syria to take over Kurdish houses that had been abandoned – thus permanently altering the population of the border area, making it much harder for Syrian Kurds to return to the area and to link up with Kurds inside Turkey.

How did we get here, with Turkey, the NATO member that in the recent past has called other NATO members “Nazis,” “terrorists,” and supporters of an “army of terror,” that further threatened 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) would respond in kind, warned that the Americans would then get “an Ottoman slap”?

All that took place early in 2018, without any response by the American government. It allowed the Turks to drive the Kurds

from Afrin, and to move Syrian Arabs as noted above, into abandoned Kurdish homes. Then, at the end of 2018, Erdogan threatened a new attack on the Kurds in Syria. This time the Turkish goal would be to force all of the Syrian Kurds in the area east of the Euphrates River away from the Syrian-Turkish border, as had already been done with YPG forces west of the Euphrates. Pushing the Kurdish YPG force back from the border would make it easier for the Turkish military to monitor, and interdict, any possible cross-border infiltration. Erdogan wants the American troops out of the way. And thanks to Trump's decision in late December, all those troops will be out of the way – they are being brought home.

Erdogan has done nothing to deserve our acquiescence in his policy of driving the Syrian Kurds away from the border. And he has done nothing, furthermore, to deserve continued Turkish membership in NATO. Or more exactly, he has done a great deal to deserve being expelled from NATO.

Let's recapitulate: Erdogan has repeatedly attacked the Kurds in Syria, who have been our closest 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 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 say 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 "Gulenist" operative. Brunson was finally freed, most begrudgingly, and only after terrific American

economic pressure (threats of more boycotts and tariffs) on Ankara. Erdogan also has called the Germans “Nazis” for refusing to allow his men to campaign for votes from Turks living in Germany.

Then there was Erdogan’s fury when Austria shut down some Turkish-funded mosques, in which he predicted a coming war “between the crescent and the cross,” leaving no doubt as to which side he 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 turns 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? Hasn't Turkey

repeatedly been attacking the Kurds in Syria, who have been the most effective American ally in the fight against ISIS? 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? And why should Turkey, now so hostile to the West, continue to be a member of NATO, when there is a much better candidate for NATO membership waiting in the wings? That candidate is Israel. It is of far greater military value to NATO, and unlike Turkey, is part of the West that NATO was established to protect. As we know, Israel has a very effective military, planted in the middle of the Muslim world. It is a world leader in cyberwar (Stuxnet) and cyber security, in missile defense (Iron Dome) and drone technology (Iron Drone). It has superb intelligence on the Muslim world, and has provided information to NATO members that has helped them to foil dozens of major attacks with the potential for mass casualties, including some involving explosives on civilian airliners. Unlike Turkey, Israel remains an unshakeable part of the West.

Once upon a time, Turkey was indeed “our NATO ally.” That was when the enemy was the Soviet Union, and Turkey was happy to collaborate in efforts to contain the Soviet Union, which for the Turks was understood to be their hereditary enemy, Russia, under a slightly different guise. In the early 1950s, Turkey could and did offer troops for the UN forces in the Korean War, as well as listening posts for NATO to monitor Soviet communications, and use, by the Americans, of Incirlik Air Base.

But who could imagine Recep Tayyip Erdogan offering bases today, or contributing any kind of military aid, to a coalition of non-Muslim states, for use against any Muslim state or states? Suppose, for example, that Iran and Hezbollah went to war against Israel, firing 70,000 of the 140,000 rockets Hezbollah now possesses, from bases in southern

Lebanon into Israel, and that other longer-range missiles were fired by Iranian forces from bases in eastern Syria and Iran. And suppose that simultaneously with this colossal barrage, there were to be an uprising by Hamas in Gaza and by Hamas-cum-Fatah forces in the West Bank. Suppose further that the situation became even more difficult for Israel than during the Yom Kippur war, with the northern Galilee overrun by units both of Hezbollah and of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. And imagine, further, that the Americans, though willing if necessary to go it alone, wanted NATO to join in intervening to help Israel. Turkey not only would not contribute, but would warn Iran of NATO planning and, very likely, militarily support the Iranians and Hezbollah. Make up any scenario you wish, where NATO might want to intervene against Muslims. One can imagine a civil war, of non-Muslims finally having to rise up against Muslims in, say, France. It's not, alas, far-fetched. On September 15, 2018, the writer Eric Zemmour warned France of a coming "civil war against Islam and its French collaborators" on the public radio station France Inter. Gerard Collomb, France's former Interior Minister, has said: "It's difficult to estimate but I would say that in five years the situation could become irreversible. Yes, we have five, six years to avoid the worst," by which he meant an open civil war. We know whose side NATO – that is, all but one member – would take, intervening to help the French regain their country. One NATO member would not help the French, but side with the Muslims in France – Turkey.

Now Erdogan is again going after the Syrian Kurds. The Americans won't be there to interfere. It's time for the Trump Administration to insist that all "foreign forces" that entered Syria during the civil war – meaning Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, and the U.S. (but not the Russians, because they had been present in Syria long before the civil war, with a naval base at Latakia and an airbase) – should now leave. And if the Turks refuse to leave (and they will) and if they continue to battle our close allies the Syrian Kurds (and they will),

these choices by Erdogan will constitute Reasons #876 and #877 to expel Turkey from a re-purposed NATO and, sensibly, to welcome Israel in.

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