

# Turkey Has Lost Its Biggest Cheerleader: The U.S. Military

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**A discussion of Ankara's strained relationship with the European Union, its a la carte approach to NATO, and the weakening of formerly solid U.S.-Turkey military-to-military ties.**

**T**urkey's relations with the EU and place within NATO have come under increased scrutiny over the past year, especially during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's campaign to win a constitutional referendum this April, which many saw as a power grab. Now, a row over the access of German parliamentarians to Turkey's critical Incirlik air base has prompted Germany to send most of its forces fighting ISIS in Syria to Jordan. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg works to broker a compromise between the two countries, *The Cipher Brief's* Fritz Lodge spoke with the director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Soner Cagaptay, about what effect this will have on the future of Turkish relations with the EU and place within NATO, and how this will affect U.S. policy in the region.

**The Cipher Brief: What is the status of Turkey-EU relations now, and especially Turkish relations with Germany, as the crisis over German political access to Turkey's Incirlik air base continues?**

**Soner Cagaptay:** As is the case with almost any other issue, understanding Turkey-EU ties involves understanding Turkey's current internal political dynamics. Turkey is split between half of the country that is loyal to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the other half that completely rejects his rule. For the half that is loyal to Erdogan, what we're seeing in this crisis between Turkey, the EU, and other Western countries, including the U.S., is a seismic shift. Since the failed coup against Erdogan last year, a new narrative has emerged amongst his supporters that I call "Erdoganism."

This "Erdoganist" narrative holds that Erdogan is a historic figure who will make Turks great and Muslims proud again, and that you have to support him not because Erdogan needs to be supported personally, but because this is how you put your weight behind this great historical project.

By inversion, Erdoganism also suggests that if you do not support Erdogan, you are therefore not a good Turk or not a good Muslim, and you should be prosecuted for that. I would also add that if you oppose Erdogan, you're more than likely a proxy for foreigners.

Here is Erdoganism par excellence: blending political Islam and Turkish nationalism under Erdogan's persona, whose leitmotif is that Erdogan is protecting Turkey and the Muslim World against foreign attacks. Those foreigners are usually Westerners, which in the Turkish context often means the Europeans. A strong anti-European and anti-Western animus guides the thinking of the pro-Erdogan bloc.

Therefore, I believe that what we saw before the Turkish constitutional referendum in April is that the crises with the Dutch and Germans were not episodic glitches. They actually represented the culmination of this new thinking in Turkey, where the country's ruling political ideology seems to be driven by a deep sense of anti-European, anti-Western sentiment. Even if Germany and Turkey come to an understanding this time, there will be other crises with other European powers going forward.

This is not about Erdogan's electoral politics, as some suggested at the time of the Turkish referendum in April, it runs much deeper. To supporters of Erdoganism, this is not just about one event, it is a historical narrative in a string of events that sees the West attacking Turkey and the Muslim World throughout history. First in the Crusades, next in World War I, and finally in the attempted coup against Erdogan, which they believe had foreign (European and American) backers. Half of Turkey is completely mesmerized by this narrative.

**TCB: Is there any kind of deliberate political rationale behind Erdogan and his government's actions vis-a-vis the EU, Germany, the Netherlands, and others?**

**Cagaptay:** Clearly there is a kind of political tsunami of Erdoganism for the half of Turkey that supports him. A tsunami that is also drowning the other half of Turkey that doesn't support him.

But I also agree that there is a pragmatic twist to this. Although Erdoganism has cast Europe as the enemy -- the external enemy which uses proxies in Turkey to hurt him -- Erdogan also knows that his success in winning elections since 2002 has largely been driven by the record amount of (mostly European) Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that his country has attracted.

The reason international businesses have put money in Turkish startups or greenfield investments in Turkey is largely related to Turkey's brand as a country in the process of joining the European Union, which has helped bring these record amounts of FDI over the past decade. Turkey has seen its growth driven mainly by this foreign investment, and that growth has driven the rise of his base of voters, who are attracted to him mainly because he has brought economic prosperity and lifted many of them out of poverty.

Erdogan knows all of this well, so he can't really afford to break the economic foundation of the relationship with Europe. Therefore, he is going to play a game of transactionalizing Turkish-EU ties, notwithstanding the anti-European animus of Erdoganism in the background.

He will try to maintain Turkey's economic ties to Europe, which is why, ironically, at a time when the Erdogan administration bashes Europeans daily, Ankara is also trying to deepen Turkey's customs union with the EU, which allows all sorts of industrial goods to trade freely across the border without tariffs.

He will do this by offering cooperation on the refugee issue. On the European side, EU leaders are very worried about Turkey's slide into authoritarianism. But that perception notwithstanding, Europe has a short-term problem, which is the nearly 3 million refugees that Turkey hosts and "holds." Basically, if Erdogan wants, all 3 million could be in Germany tomorrow, as well as the rest of Europe, causing serious infighting between European countries over the burden of refugees, undermining EU and NATO unity.

**TCB: Looking at NATO, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has offered to broker a compromise between Turkey and Germany over the Incirlik issue -- but all this follows a \$2 billion preliminary deal for Turkey to purchase S-400 SAMs from Russia last month. What does all that tell you about Turkey's place in NATO?**

**Cagaptay:** On the S-400 deal, I don't think it's final until it's final. Turkey signed similar agreements to buy air defense systems from China, and it looked like a deal, but Turkey eventually came down the ladder after the NATO and U.S. backlash in 2010-2011.

But this does suggest that, while Erdogan doesn't want Turkey's membership in NATO to end, he is also treating Turkey's NATO as an a la carte club, in which he buys into certain NATO programs and initiatives but not all of them, because unlike the Turkey of yesteryear where the country's leaders believed their country to be in a commonwealth within NATO -- sharing the same values -- that's not how Erdoganism sees the world.

The view of Erdogan and his supporters is that Samuel Huntington was right, there is a clash of civilizations, but he was wrong because the Muslims will win. Erdogan does not see NATO necessarily as a place where likeminded countries sharing similar values come together, it's more his security outlet where he goes to buy security, and he needs a lot of that security against Russia.

Let's not forget that Putin will never treat Turkey as an equal, although that is how Erdogan sees Russia. Putin will always see Turkey as a secondary power, and while he's very irritated by Erdogan's policies in Syria, he is also alarmed that the success of political Islam in Turkey will animate Russian Muslims, who have strong ethnic and historic ties to Turkish Muslims.

Therefore, Putin has an interest in making sure that Erdogan does not succeed, and Erdogan must know this. As an example, in the run-up to the April referendum in Turkey, the Turkish-language version of Sputnik news produced many times more blatantly anti-Erdogan content than the Turkish outlets of Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, Al Jazeera, and BBC put together, as documented by Naz Durakoglu.

Erdogan also knows that he has many enemies in his neighborhood, including Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. So my guess is that he will continue to rely on NATO to buy security against Russia and Assad and against Iran, but he does not see NATO as a club with shared core values as his predecessors did.

**TCB: Where do you think the Trump Administration stands on this NATO infighting between Turkey, Germany, and other European allies? Do you see any sign that they are worried about this, or that they are trying to mediate?**

**Cagaptay:** Defense Secretary James Mattis really cares about a good relationship with Turkey, and he's very committed to smoothing out any kinks in the relationship.

There are many problems in bilateral ties, from U.S. cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish YPG, to the Turkish decision to buy Russian weapons systems, to the increasing anti-American, anti-European, and anti-Western rhetoric coming out of Turkey. And this rhetoric should not be ignored because it has been going on for the last 15 years, and it has started to go mainstream because it is being supported by government officials and pro-government media. According to the most recent Pew Center report, whereas other countries are worried about ISIS, global warming, refugee flows, cyberattacks, and economic collapse as key global threats, uniquely among all nations, Turks view the U.S. as a major global threat. No other country polls like Turkey, and this is not accidental -- it is linked to anti-Americanism that the AKP has been feeding to its own people since its rise in 2002, as well as issues in bilateral ties. These anti-American sentiments are now quite mainstream in Turkey. That should concern the U.S., and Secretary Mattis is aware of it.

But rebuilding confidence in the U.S.-Turkish relationship is going to be hard because military-to-military ties

between Turkey and the U.S. have been damaged, possibly beyond repair in the short term. It used to be that in Washington, the strongest advocates for Turkey were people from the U.S. military. They had great impressions from working with Turks in NATO operations in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, they were grateful for Turkey's part in winning the Cold War by blocking the Soviet Union's access to the warm seas, and they were just very supportive of Ankara in general.

That is now the opposite. I would say that the people who have the most negative views of Turkey in Washington are, unfortunately, in the U.S. military, as a result of a series of events, all of which took place on Erdogan's watch.

Turkey's refusal to join the Iraq war in 2003, the collapse of Turkish-Israeli ties, the Turkish decision to buy Chinese air defense systems (although they backed down on that), Turkey's recent decision now to buy Russian missiles, and Turkey's lax policy in allowing radicals to cross into Syria in an effort to undermine Assad -- all of these factors have hurt the relationship. And of course, from the Turkish perspective, the U.S. reticence to fully support Turkey against the Kurdish PKK group over the last decade -- as well as the U.S. decision to fully support the Kurdish YPG against ISIS in Syria -- has really soured the relationship.

Going back to the U.S. side, after 15 years of degrading ties, the U.S. military is probably one of Turkey's weakest supporters in Washington, and that is just sad. Turkey has lost its biggest cheerleader in Washington, and I cannot see who will cheerlead for Turkey now in Washington.

Many around Washington are also worried about Turkey's slide into authoritarianism, most notable because that suggests that it is a country in crisis. As I elaborate in my book *The New Sultan* (<https://www.newsultan.info/>), the crisis is that half the country loathes Erdogan and half the country loves him. If the country is democratic, Erdogan cannot govern the way he likes, so he is taking steps to end democracy. But the other half that doesn't like him will never give in to this, which means that in the best-case scenario going forward, Turkey will be in a permanent state of crisis, consumed by its domestic tensions, and unable to be a strong ally to the U.S. or deliver reliable cooperation.

The U.S. administration also focuses on Turkey from the perspective of fighting ISIS. It wants continued access to Turkish bases, from which the U.S. flies missions against ISIS. So, in the short term, the idea seems to be to keep the relationship with Erdogan going, which is why he was invited to Washington. At the moment, the Trump Administration wants to reach out to him and not push him away. This seems to be the focus of U.S. policy for now. ❖

*The Cipher Brief* (<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/turkey-has-lost-its-biggest-cheerleader-us-military-1093>)

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