

# How the U.S. Military Lost Its Favor for Turkey

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## Despite continued bilateral security cooperation, thirteen years of policy differences have taken their toll on the U.S. military's attitude toward Turkey.

**W**hen I came to Washington in 2002, the Department of Defense was among Turkey's best friends inside the U.S. government. The Pentagon considered Turkey a staunch ally, and uniformed U.S. personnel had a deep affection for Turkey going back to U.S.-Turkish cooperation in the Cold War, and then in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Today, the Pentagon has, for the most part, lost its fondness for Turkey. This change is a result of America's shifting sense of Turkey's identity and role in the NATO alliance. This is not to be mistaken for outright hostility; Turkey is formally still Washington's ally. Strictly military relations are even flourishing; U.S. officers respect their Turkish counterparts and want to work with them, and Turkey has friends in other places in the American government. Nevertheless, the U.S. military no longer views Turkey with the same favor.

The transformation of Turkey's standing in the eyes of the U.S. military is due to Turkish and American dynamics. Following the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government, including the military, became preoccupied with identifying moderate Muslim allies. Turkey benefited from this endeavor, as the ruling pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the elections in 2002, taking office on a platform of moderation.

The AKP upset its potential allies in Washington, however, when it refused to help Washington in the 2003 Iraq War. Some argue that the American military never fully recovered from that break, though the rest of Washington eventually did. In any case, bilateral ties recovered gradually once Ankara started to help the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan and against al Qaeda -- under the AKP in the last decade, Turkey became a logistics hub for U.S. operations in the Middle East and beyond. In return, Washington started to offer Turkey intelligence assistance against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in 2007, and relations between Ankara and Washington began to strengthen.

The U.S. military was arguably nearly ready to let the fallout of the Iraq War go, but the 2010 crisis in Turkish-Israeli ties left that hope unrealized. The breakdown of ties between the Pentagon's two key allies in the Middle East left the U.S. military dumbfounded, but also frustrated at the AKP government's role in precipitating the flotilla crisis that led to the collapse of Turkish-Israeli ties in May 2010.

The U.S. military's confidence in Turkey was shaken further in 2013 when Turkey decided to buy a Chinese air defense system, raising rare public objections from Washington. NATO also warned that the alliance would never plug the Chinese system into its own air defense system. In Washington's view, Turkey added "insult to injury" with this move -- Ankara had just turned to NATO to deploy its Patriot missiles to Turkey against the Syrian threat in December 2012. Thus, on one hand, Turkey had no problem relying on NATO's military support, while on the other, it was purchasing a system that could not be used to support Turkey's NATO allies.

Since then, Ankara has been trying to reverse the damage, as there are signs that Turkey might buy a European air defense system, but the harm has been done. The Pentagon sees this episode as yet another case of an ideological AKP-run Turkey working with America's adversaries.

Following a pattern of ups and downs, at the onset of the Arab Spring, Turkish cooperation with Washington in Libya rejuvenated hopes for restoration of the U.S. military's favor for Turkey. Once again, however, events on the ground dashed that hope. When the Arab Spring arrived in Syria, at Turkey's doorstep in 2011, Ankara jumped into the Syrian uprising ahead of Washington. However, it also turned a blind eye to the jihadists, who were going into Syria to fight the Assad regime. It was willing to ignore these threats because Ankara's primary goal in Syria has been ousting the Assad regime. To be fair, Turkey never intended to support the jihadists. Rather, Ankara believed, and still hopes that, "Assad will fall, and good guys will take over, and then these good guys will clean up the bad guys."

Of course, that has not happened. In the interim, at least some of the bad guys who have crossed into Syria have morphed into the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). Ankara's inability to predict and preempt the jihadist backlash has added to the Pentagon's concerns over Turkey. Today, many in the U.S. military unfortunately view Turkey as a country that works with America's adversaries in Syria. Ankara, on the other hand, sees the radicalization process in Syria differently, and blames a lack of U.S. support for the moderate rebels as the primary cause for the rise of jihadists in the conflict.

Ironically, despite their different approaches, the ISIS threat has brought Turkey and Washington closer, and the countries are now combatting ISIS bilaterally. In a technical sense, U.S.-Turkish military ties are flourishing. But behind this aura of deep cooperation, key differences persist. For instance, Turkey's proxy on the ground in Syria is Ahrar al-Sham, a group that is only one degree removed from al Qaeda. Conversely, America's proxy on the ground in Syria is the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD), which is only one degree removed from the PKK.

Thirteen years of policy differences between Ankara and Washington have taken their toll on the U.S. military's views of Turkey: many in the Pentagon see Turkey not as a staunch ally, but as a wayward country in NATO that wears religion and ideology on its sleeve -- in violation of alliance etiquette. NATO is like a polite dinner party with no room for discussions on religion, and the AKP's Turkey is like the awkward guest at that dinner party who insists on discussing religion.

Subsequently, the U.S. military is at best agnostic towards Turkey -- a stark change from the pre-AKP years, when most uniformed personnel had deep affection for Ankara. Washington and Ankara may work together militarily, but, unfortunately, the U.S. military's fondness for Turkey is over, at least for the time being.

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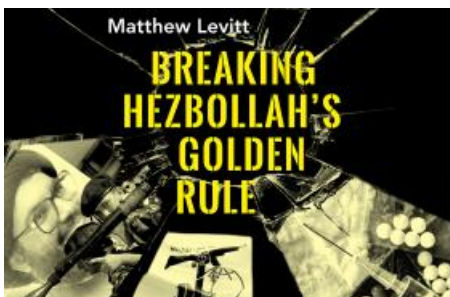
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