

A NATO without Turkey

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The European Union has long debated the merits of Turkish EU membership. But now, nearly a decade after Islamists took the reins of power in Ankara, the central question is no longer whether Turkey should be integrated into Europe's economic and political structure, but rather whether Turkey should remain a part of the Western defense structure.

Recent developments suggest that while Turkey's military leadership remains committed to the state's secular, Western orientation and the defining principles of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the civilian Islamist government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) seems to have different ideas. Ankara is increasingly pursuing illiberal policies at home, for instance by attacking independent media, while aligning itself with militant, anti-western Middle East regimes abroad.

The latest demonstration of Ankara's political shift was its cancellation last month of Israel's long-standing participation in NATO military exercises in Turkey. Even worse, on the same day Israel was disinvited, Turkey announced imminent military exercises with Syria, a member of the U.S. list of "State Sponsors of Terrorism." These developments came just weeks after Ankara and Damascus established a "senior strategic cooperation council." These developments could signal the beginning of the end of Turkey's close military and economic cooperation with the Jewish state.

Ankara is simultaneously moving closer to the mullocracy in Tehran, even though the Islamic Republic is undermining stability in Afghanistan and Iraq by providing insurgents in both countries with explosives that are killing NATO and U.S. soldiers. The Iranian regime is also threatening to annihilate Israel, the very state Turkey is now distancing itself from. And yet Turkey and Iran have signed several security cooperation agreements over the past few years, and just two months ago, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan hinted he would oppose sanctions against Iran, saying he "firmly believe[d] that the international community's concern over Iran's nuclear program should be eased." This past June, Turkish President Abdullah Gul was among the first to call Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to congratulate him on his fraudulent re-election.

Meanwhile at home, individual liberty and rule of law have gone by the wayside. The Islamist government -- in an effort to silence critics -- attempts to bankrupt the independent and secularist Turkish media through extra-legal tax fines. The AKP government has also targeted political opponents by arresting them on dubious charges of attempting to overthrow the government.

Ankara's dramatic policy transformation seems inconsistent with the fundamental values that underpin the alliance. NATO partners are bound by the principles articulated in the 1949 charter, which affirm member states' "desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments...[a] determin[ation] to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." Member states are also committed to "seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area."

As Ankara's politics shift, Turkey's willingness to take on politically difficult NATO missions could also diminish, bringing into question the commitment to "collective defense." While Turkey has deployed troops to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, it's unclear that Ankara would support NATO efforts to stem Russian pressure westward in Latvia or Lithuania. Judging from Turkey's equivocal position on Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, it seems unlikely that Turkey today would even consent to training missions in the Baltic States. Justifying his tilt toward Moscow, Mr. Erdogan said "we have an important trade volume [with Russia]. We would act in line with what Turkey's national interests require."

While Ankara's politics have changed, the military's pro-Western disposition reportedly has not. But over the past decade, the dynamics between the politicians and the general staff have been transformed. For better or worse, Western pressures have compelled the Turkish military to remain in the barracks, and refrain from interfering in political developments. Today, the Turkish military can do little but watch as the secular, democratic, pro-Western republic established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the early 1900s is undermined.

While it's still too early to write Turkey out of NATO, in the not so distant future, the alliance will reach a decision point. In 2014, NATO's next generation fighter plane, the Joint Strike Fighter, will be delivered. Given the direction of Turkish politics, serious questions must be asked about whether the Islamist government in Ankara can be trusted with the highly advanced technology.

It's time that NATO start thinking about a worst case scenario in Turkey. For even if the increasingly Islamist state remains a NATO partner, at best, it seems Turkey will be an unreliable partner. Since the 1930s, the country has been a model of modernization and moderation in the Middle East. But absent a remarkable turnaround, it would appear that the West is losing Turkey. Should this occur, it would constitute the most dramatic development in the region

since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

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