

# U.S.-Turkish Cooperation against New Maritime Threats in the Mediterranean Basin

by [Orhan Babaoglu \(/experts/orhan-babaoglu\)](/experts/orhan-babaoglu)

Dec 7, 2004

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Orhan Babaoglu \(/experts/orhan-babaoglu\)](/experts/orhan-babaoglu)

Orhan K. Babaoglu, a captain in the Turkish navy, is a visiting military fellow in The Washington Institute's [Turkish Research Program \(templateC11.php?CID=59\)](#). Before joining the Institute, he was assigned to the Turkish Naval Forces Command in Ankara, where he served as strategy branch chief in the Plans and Policy



## Brief Analysis

On November 23, 2004, Gen. James Jones, NATO's supreme allied commander for Europe, praised Operation Active Endeavour (OAE) for its role on the war on terror. OAE is NATO's post-September 11 answer to the question of naval security in the Mediterranean Sea. With the threat of terrorism on the open waters gaining increasing attention, especially in the aftermath of the 2000 USS Cole bombing in Yemen and the September 11 attacks, the Mediterranean basin (including the Black Sea) has become a new focal point for policymakers. The basin lies between three dangerous conflict areas -- the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. Moreover, as a passageway between developed and underdeveloped nations, with access to three strategically important sea passages -- Gibraltar in the west, the Suez Canal in the south, and the Turkish Straits in the north -- the Mediterranean gives terrorists, human traffickers, and drug and arms smugglers easy access to the long and difficult to patrol coastlines of Europe. Is the West doing an adequate job of confronting the new threats in the Mediterranean? What role does the U.S.-Turkish alliance play in this enterprise?

## Background: Operation Active Endeavor

On October 4, 2001, the North Atlantic Council, NATO's executive body, unanimously decided to provide new support against terrorism in response to the horrendous attacks of September 11. Specifically, the council decided to begin maritime patrolling operations in the Mediterranean, which had been left with a power vacuum after the Cold War. (The great powers left the Mediterranean during the 1990s; by 2001, the U.S. Navy presence was limited to two ships, Britain had no permanent presence, and Russia had no presence of any sort.) The result of this initiative was OAE.

Mission and command. The initial aim of OAE was to demonstrate NATO's determination and unity via surveillance and reconnaissance operations in selected sectors of the eastern Mediterranean. Although OAE was launched to support the United States in its struggle against terrorism, the U.S. military is not in charge of the operation, unlike in other NATO endeavors. OAE is conducted under the NATO chain of command, headed by an officer with the title "Commander Allied Naval Forces Southern Europe" (COMNAVSOUTH). This does not mean that the U.S. Navy is uninterested in the outcome of OAE. On the contrary, if nothing else, allied contributions to maritime safety in the Mediterranean ease the burden on the U.S. Navy, which is overloaded with worldwide commitments.

Although OAE has gone largely unnoticed in the media, several factors make it a crucial operation:

- It is the first and only NATO operation launched based on Article 5 of the organization's founding Washington Treaty, which stipulates that member countries help one another in the case of an "armed attack against one or more of them."
- It is the longest operation in NATO's history.
- It is the first NATO military operation directed against terrorism writ large instead of a specific military target. In fact, OAE has been widely criticized for its lack of a defined enemy and a clear endgame. Despite the criticism, the operation has been sustained for more than three years.

Execution. OAE is conducted on a rotating basis by NATO's two main standing naval forces, Standing Naval Forces Mediterranean (STANAVFORMED) and Standing Naval Forces Atlantic (STANAVFORLANT). Ten NATO nations (Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, Spain, Britain, the United States, Canada, and Portugal) have permanently committed one frigate-size unit each to OAE, while other members (e.g., Norway and Belgium) have assigned their naval forces as needed.

Task Force Endeavor continues to conduct surveillance and monitoring of major shipping lanes in the eastern Mediterranean. Since the mission began, more than 50,000 vessels have been hailed, more than fifty compliant boardings have taken place, and 414 allied noncombatant ships have been escorted safely through the Strait of Gibraltar. NATO is rather secretive about other aspects of OAE, however. Officials have hinted that illegal cargo has been detected and diverted on several occasions, but no official statement has been made yet for the sake of information security.

#### Implications for NATO and U.S.-Turkish Cooperation

NATO has declared OAE a success and asserted that it will continue to play a role in the fight against terrorism. On March 15, 2004, the North Atlantic Council agreed to expand OAE's area of operations to the entire Mediterranean. It also decided to enlist the support of countries affiliated with the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (which includes all NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries), the Partnership for Peace (NATO's cooperation scheme with the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia), and the Mediterranean Dialogue (a NATO partnership involving Israel and Arab states in the southern Mediterranean). In response, Russia has expressed its willingness to participate, especially in light of the Beslan school hostage tragedy in September. After extensive dialogue between NATO and Russia to remove political barriers to such cooperation, three Russian vessels from the Black Sea Fleet set sail to the Mediterranean on November 5 to participate in a NATO operation for the first time in history.

Turkey, a longtime NATO ally and one of the strongest naval powers in the eastern Mediterranean, currently heads two other maritime security initiatives in the region. Possessing the longest Mediterranean and Black Sea coastlines of any nearby country, Turkey has a particular interest in protecting these waterways. In addition to providing extensive support to OAE, Turkey sponsors the activities of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), a unique non-NATO initiative that includes all six Black Sea littorals: NATO members Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania, along with nonmembers Russia, Georgia, and Ukraine. BLACKSEAFOR conducts peacetime naval activities and is preparing for participation in the global war on terror. Turkey also carries out its own antiterror naval initiative, Operation Black Sea Harmony, a surveillance endeavor aimed at enhancing security in the vicinity of the Istanbul Strait. Turkey has called for other littorals and BLACKSEAFOR to take part in this operation, and arrangements are being made toward that end.

Both OAE and Turkey's maritime initiatives have proven successful, as not a single incident of terrorism has taken place in the Mediterranean or the Black Sea since their commencement. These operations have also contributed to peace and stability in the region by providing a smooth platform for coordination between NATO and non-NATO

actors, while mobilizing NATO naval resources in the Mediterranean to an unforeseen extent. While OAE has set an example for multinational cooperation in the fight against terrorism in the Mediterranean, the BLACKSEAFOR initiative has been successful in fostering mutual understanding in the Black Sea. BLACKSEAFOR, which now deploys for one month a year, could address the security threats in the Black Sea better if it were transformed into a standing naval force that has permanent headquarters. (Access of nonlittoral states to the Black Sea is strictly regulated by the 1937 Montreux Treaty, which set term and tonnage limits on their navies.)

As NATO envisions maritime security operations in new areas such as the Black and Caspian Seas -- a region that possesses rich energy resources and lies at the center of many potentially explosive ethnic and interstate conflicts -- both the alliance and the United States should draw upon the lessons and experience gained during existing operations. As the only country with a long history of participation in both OAE and BLACKSEAFOR, Turkey could serve as a valuable U.S. partner in securing vital maritime passages throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Capt. Orhan Babaoglu (Turkish Navy) is a visiting military fellow in the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #924

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaia

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)