

# Crisis erupts as Turkey is labelled a hostile power in NATO military exercise

Halil Celik

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Amid growing fears of a region-wide war in the Middle East and a mounting crisis in the European Union (EU), Turkish-NATO relations are under deep strain after an incident at a computer-assisted exercise of NATO's Joint Warfare Centre, in Norway. Turkish officers found Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan listed as an "enemy collaborator," and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, on the "hostile leader list" for the exercise.

After Turkish troops withdrew from the exercises and Ankara lashed out at NATO, on November 17, NATO reported that a Norwegian technician, who was allegedly responsible for the "unpleasant accident," had been dismissed. Meanwhile, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and Norwegian Defence Minister Frank Bakke-Jensen issued apologies to Turkey.

These statements did not resolve the issue, however. Since the main NATO powers backed a failed coup that sought to overthrow the Turkish government and personally murder Erdogan on July 15, 2016, Turkey's relations with its erstwhile Western allies have rapidly deteriorated. There are bitter tensions over the war in Syria and Turkey's improving relations with Russia.

Erdogan responded to the unambiguous threat from NATO by trying to whip up a Turkish nationalist atmosphere. At a provincial congress of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the eastern province of Bayburt, on November 19, he called the incident an attack against "Turkey and the Turkish nation. ... Today there is a Turkey that cannot be compared with 15 years ago in every field—from the economy to the defence industry and from trade to diplomacy."

The pro-EU and pro-NATO Republican People's Party (CHP) condemned the incident as "insult" to Turkey, stating that it was not a "topic that can be avoided with an ordinary 'we apologize' thing."

Erdogan's de facto political partner, the leader of the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, even called into question Turkey's NATO membership. On November 18, he declared on Twitter: "It is necessary for Turkey to question NATO. What does NATO want from Turkey? What is it waiting for? What does it want to achieve?... If we cannot stay in this structure [i.e., NATO] it would not be the end of the world."

On November 19, Turkish EU Minister Omer Celik called for investigating the entire chain of command involved in the NATO exercise in Norway. Speaking at the 9th annual Halifax International Security Forum in Canada, he asked: "Is there no chain of command? Does he [the Norwegian civilian contractor] not have a commander?"

The issue was also a key topic in the Turkish Chief of General Staff Gen. Hulusi Akar's speech at the Halifax forum. Underscoring that the "NATO administrators responded timely and appropriately," Akar said that his forces would "not allow anyone to undermine our alliance and our solidarity."

According to Turkey's state-owned Anadolu Agency, Akar alleged that the movement of cleric Fethullah Gulen—the principal Turkish suspect in the 2016 coup attempt—could be involved. He declared, "Recently, in one of the NATO exercises we had an unpleasant and unacceptable event, reportedly committed by an individual who may be backed by [Fethullahist Terrorist Organization] FETÖ members."

In March, Norway granted political asylum to five Turkish officers based in Norway, who refused to return home after the failed July 2016 coup attempt, provoking a harsh response from Ankara.

Akar also criticized Turkey's NATO allies for arming the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party

(PYD), and its armed wing, People's Protection Units (YPG). "It was unfortunate to witness the utilization of terrorist organizations as proxies during this conflict. This has further complicated the situation," he said. Akar concluded his speech by quoting Erdogan's criticism of the UN Security Council: "The world is bigger than five."

As the crisis between Ankara and NATO intensified, the EU decided to cut "pre-ascension funds" by €105 million (\$124 million), while freezing another €70 million in previously announced spending. The EU was scheduled to provide €4.5 billion (\$5.31 billion) to Turkey from 2014 to 2020, to support Turkey while it had pre-membership relations to the EU.

After the launch of negotiations over Turkish EU membership in 2005, talks between Ankara and Brussels entered into a stalemate as various EU governments raised objections.

Ankara's relations with several EU member states, including Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, further collapsed after these countries supported the 2016 coup attempt. Bourgeois politicians during the Dutch elections and elsewhere across Europe sought to whip up anti-Turkish sentiment amid growing social discontent. Turkish leaders for their part slammed their European counterparts for "providing support to [terrorist] groups hostile to Turkey," i.e., the Kurdish nationalist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian offshoot PYD, as well as the Gulen movement.

Turkish-US relations are collapsing over similar issues. On October 8, days after the chief prosecutor in Istanbul issued a detention warrant for a local employee of the US Consulate in Istanbul, Ankara and Washington mutually suspended all non-migrant visa services. Less than two weeks ago, a Turkish court arrested another individual for spying and attempting to overthrow the government, based on his alleged links with the Gulen movement.

Another topic in the Turkish-US relations is the pending action against the Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab on charges of violating US sanctions on Iran via Turkish banks. Zarrab was arrested in the United States in March 2016. Another defendant in the trial is Hakan Atilla, a deputy general manager of Halkbank, who was arrested in March 2017 over charges of cooperating with him.

Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag

described the case as a "political plot" against Turkey, while President Erdogan has previously claimed that the US authorities had "ulterior motives" in prosecuting Zarrab.

Reportedly, Zarrab has recently offered to provide evidence to the court—a move Washington could use to turn up the pressure on the Turkish government.

Lying behind the crisis in NATO-Turkey relations are deepening strategic conflicts, as Ankara improves its ties with Russia and Iran, two of the main targets of the US war planning.

The Turkish army is mounting its operation mainly against the YPG/PYD under an agreement reached in Astana, Kazakhstan and backed by Russia and Iran, which support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. On September 14, Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the Syrian government and opposition groups, came together to implement a cease-fire in so-called de-escalation zones in Syria. Turkish troops are to be stationed in Idlib, while Russia and Iran will hold the surrounding territory.

Meanwhile, Turkish troops are operating in Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government territory against the PKK, again, with the support—or at least acceptance—of Baghdad and Tehran. With thousands of troops, artillery and tanks deployed to its Syrian and Iraqi borders, Ankara has long been prepared to move against the Kurdish nationalists, both in Syria and Iraq—an attack that could lead to a direct confrontation between Turkish and US troops.

On November 22, Russian, Iranian and Turkish leaders are to meet in the Russian Black Sea resort city of Sochi, for the first such meeting between the three states as they cooperate to end the more than the six-year civil war in Syria. Last week, in the run-up to the Sochi summit, the three countries' foreign ministers met in Antalya, Turkey. Following the meeting, the foreign ministers appeared optimistic over the results of the so-called Astana Process. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated, "The parties agreed on all issues."



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