

After Quran-burning provocations, Turkey-NATO tensions rise amid war on Russia

Hakan Özal
3 February 2023

Ankara has suspended NATO membership talks with Sweden and Finland after a far-right politician publicly burned copies of the Quran, a holy book for Islam, in Sweden and Denmark in late January.

As NATO escalates the war against Russia in Ukraine with the delivery of battle tanks to Ukraine, the United States, Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Canada have issued successive statements warning their citizens of the possibility of a “terrorist attack” in Turkey due to the Quran burning provocation.

“As long as it [Sweden] allows the burning of the Quran, we will not say ‘yes’ to your entry into NATO,” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said on Wednesday. “Our view on Finland is positive, but not on Sweden,” he added.

“It is not possible for us to say yes to Sweden’s NATO membership right now,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu said on Tuesday.

At a joint press conference with his Estonian counterpart on Wednesday, Çavuşoğlu said that his government considers there are “two threats to NATO” in the form of “Russia and terrorism,” Turkish state-owned Anadolu Agency reported. He added, “We, of course, understand the legitimate concerns of Estonia and the other two candidate countries [Finland and Sweden], but on the other hand, it is equally legitimate to expect our allies to understand the security concerns of Turkey and other countries.”

Reiterating his government’s support for NATO’s “open door policy,” Çavuşoğlu said, “Of course we oppose the war [in Ukraine]. We continue to support Ukraine. Turkey is also making very important efforts to end this war.” He added that Ankara’s stance was to ensure Ukraine’s “territorial integrity” at the “negotiating table.”

In an interview with Radio Sputnik, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday that the tensions with Turkey over Sweden and Finland’s membership in NATO “show the degree of mistrust within the alliance and among Western states in general.”

Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO last May, in the midst of the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine. The Erdoğan government, however, has declared its opposition to their accession, threatening a veto. A unanimous vote of all 30 member states is required for a country to join NATO.

Amid Washington’s escalation of the war against Russia, significant factions of the US political establishment are advocating responding to Turkey’s threat to veto Sweden and Finland’s NATO membership by not supplying the Turkish military with F-16s.

At the end of June, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson and Erdoğan met, followed by the signing of a memorandum by their foreign ministers.

In exchange for Sweden and Finland’s commitment to fulfill Ankara’s demands, it withdrew its veto on their NATO membership. Ankara demands that Sweden and Finland “stop supporting” the Kurdish nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), both considered “terrorist groups” by Turkey.

Sweden and Finland pledged to lift the arms embargo on Turkey imposed after its military operation against the YPG in Syria in 2019. They also pledged to process Turkey’s “expulsion or extradition requests for terror suspects immediately and in all their dimensions.” Those allegedly include supporters of Islamic preacher

Fethullah Gülen, claimed by Ankara to have led the putschist officers in the failed 2016 coup against the Erdoğan government. However, recent developments led to the breakdown of the trilateral talks.

On January 11, Kurdish nationalist groups in the Swedish capital, Stockholm, hung an effigy of Erdoğan by its feet from a pole in front of the historic city hall. Then on January 21, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant Danish far-right extremist Rasmus Paludan burned a Quran in front of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm.

After these provocations, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar announced the cancellation of Swedish Defense Minister Pål Jonson's visit to Turkey. Ankara then announced that the trilateral talks scheduled to be held in Brussels in February had been suspended "indefinitely."

In part, Erdoğan's government is resorting to populism and nationalism to try to quell social tensions and burnish its support ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections in May.

However, the tensions between Ankara and its NATO allies have far deeper roots than the immediate electoral agenda. Although it is part of the NATO alliance, the Turkish bourgeoisie, which has strong economic and military ties with Russia, believes that the US-NATO goals in the war against Russia will also harm its own interests. In addition, the US alliance with Kurdish nationalist forces in Syria is seen as unacceptable by Ankara.

As Erdoğan has already announced his army's invasion plans into Syria, Turkey's attempt to launch a comprehensive ground military operation to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish enclave led by the YPG on Turkey's southern border carries with it the risk of a confrontation between the two NATO members, the US and Turkey. Moreover, the presence of Russian, Iranian and Syrian forces in the area could turn such a military intervention into a major war.

Other critical geopolitical conflicts related to Ankara's ties with Russia, as well as to the YPG's growing power in Syria, erupted in the failed NATO-backed coup attempt against the Erdogan government in 2016. Far from being resolved, these conflicts have only deepened.

The US-NATO war against Russia has further escalated historical conflicts between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean

Sea. NATO's use and consolidation of Greece as a transshipment hub in the war against Russia is seen as a threat by Ankara.

Turkey's decision to close the Dardanelles and Istanbul Straits from the Aegean to Black Sea to all warships immediately after the Russian invasion in Ukraine based on the Montreux Convention increased Greece's logistical and regional importance. Ankara could be forced to make a critical decision if NATO powers want to move their warships into the Black Sea to counter Russia.

These developments underline the fact that NATO's war against Russia has plunged critical regions such as the Middle East, the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean into deepening geopolitical conflict. Only by uniting workers in Turkey, the region and around the world in an international and socialist movement against the war can the catastrophe be stopped.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact