



A Turkish-American Divorce?

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The United States "is an enemy country. It is a serious threat to our country's existence, its unity, integrity, present and the future. It is carrying out an open attack, and an undeclared war..."

Those aren't the words of the radicals of the Islamic State, whose "caliphate" has been dismembered by America and its international partners over the past year. Nor are they the views of Iran's ayatollahs, now facing a White House that appears committed to curbing their regime's global menace.

Rather, they are the sentiments of Ibrahim Karagul, a prominent Turkish journalist and commentator. In a recent column for Turkey's *Yeni Safak* newspaper, where he is editor-in-chief, Karagul laid out the outlandish theory that America's strategic goal in the Middle East is nothing short of the dismantlement and dismemberment of Turkey.

"The U.S. administration is implementing a plan camouflaged by NATO and outcries of 'strategic partnership,'" Karagul writes. "The plan is to divide and destroy Turkey, just like in Iraq and Syria."

Such paranoid conjecture is sadly par for the course in Turkey's notoriously conspiratorial political environment, which is replete with enemies of the state both real and imagined. But the fact that Karagul's was published in *Yeni Safak*, long considered a mouthpiece for the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, suggests that, at the very least, it runs parallel to the official thinking about America that now permeates Ankara's corridors of power.

How did we get here? Recent years have unquestionably seen a deterioration of the once-robust bilateral ties between Turkey and the United States. A stalwart Middle Eastern ally during the Cold War, Turkey over the past decade-and-a-half has become something akin to a "frienemy" – a nation which, although formally aligned with the U.S., is pursuing policies at fundamental variance with American interests.

Thus, under the direction of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ankara has embraced the notion of "strategic depth" in foreign affairs – an approach that has, among many other things, led it to expand military contacts with Russia, a major NATO adversary, and emerged as a significant safe haven and facilitator for Islamists operating in the Syrian theater. In the process, it has raised fundamental questions about its ongoing commitment to NATO, and the durability of its traditional security partnership with the United States.

Washington doubtless shoulders a measure of blame as well. For instance, the Trump administration's muddled approach to the Kurds – including its decision to arm the YPG, a faction affiliated with the controversial Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the State Department itself has designated a foreign terrorist organization – has generated outrage in Ankara. (The Administration's belated promise to disarm the YPG once the fight the Islamic State is over has done little to assuage Turkish concerns.) Moreover, America's continuing lack of a clear policy toward Iraq and Syria has fanned fears among Turkish officials that the Trump administration might, under the proper conditions, acquiesce to the birth of an independent Kurdistan – something that the Erdogan government sees as inimical to its long-term interests.

These long-simmering tensions are now in danger of breaking out into the open. Over the past two weeks, Turkey's extensive military operations in Syria's Afrin region – and Erdogan's promise to continue to press forward into more strategically vital areas – have hinted at a more aggressive Turkish military policy in the Middle East that could put Ankara and Washington on opposing sides in the unfolding regional balance of power.

The implications are profound. A house divided cannot stand, and an alliance in which two of its core members find themselves at fundamental odds can hardly be considered an alliance at all. That means Turkish-American tensions have the potential to profoundly impact the cohesion of NATO, and the effectiveness of that bloc in the Middle East and other theaters.

Bilateral ties hang in the balance as well. Turkey's increasingly assertive regional activism risks propelling it into direct confrontation with the United States on a number of fronts, most directly in Syria and Iraq. So, too, does the growing conviction in Ankara (expressed most clearly by Karagul, but shared by many others) that Washington is willfully trying to undermine the Turkish state.

Given the historic nature of the strategic relationship between the two countries, there are compelling reasons for Turkish and American officials to pull back from the brink and seek some sort of compromise. But if one cannot be found, it will be necessary to start thinking about what it might mean for the region – and for NATO – if Washington and Ankara truly go their separate ways.

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