



## The Donald Should Wave Goodbye to The Sultan

Doug Bandow

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Among Donald Trump's odd fixations are foreign strongmen. They are a reality and must be dealt with. Sometimes they can and do aid U.S. policy. But just because they are quick to toss opponents into jail doesn't mean that they necessarily are the sort of decisive leaders Washington should back.

On Election Day, National Security Adviser-designate Michael Flynn published a disturbing article that argued: "Turkey is vital to U.S. interests. Turkey is really our strongest ally against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as a source of stability in the region. It provides badly needed cooperation with U.S. military operations." He further contended that "[w]e need to see the world from Turkey's perspective" and "recognize Turkey as a priority."

His piece was wrong in almost every detail. Turkey refused the U.S. permission to open a northern front against Iraq in 2003 and only reluctantly allowed Washington to use Incirlik air base in the campaign against the Islamic State. Ankara spent the early years of the Syrian civil war cooperating with ISIS, allowing transit of men and materiel. Today, Turkey is devoting most of its energy to fighting America's Kurdish allies.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government is a friend of the Muslim Brotherhood, dramatically turned against Israel before partly making up, and most recently has intervened in Iraq against the wishes of the U.S.-backed Baghdad government. In late 2015, Ankara risked war with Russia, which could have dragged in the rest of the NATO members, including America. But of late Turkey has gotten quite chummy with Moscow. Along the way, Erdogan stoked the conflict with Kurdish separatists for domestic political advantage and turned last year's attempted coup into his personal "Reichstag Fire," justifying a massive crackdown on anyone with the temerity to oppose him. Even school kids get prosecuted for insulting the Great Man.

Whatever Turkey is today, it is not a vital American ally, regional force for stability, valued partner against ISIS, model Muslim democracy, or the many other positive things it has been called. Most recently, Erdogan charged that Washington has been helping the Islamic State, hardly a friendly act when the U.S. has been leading the coalition against that very movement, which threatens Middle Eastern states, including Turkey, far more than it does America.

Donald Trump obviously doesn't plan to emphasize human rights as a foreign policy issue. Nevertheless, he should be concerned about a supposed ally which simultaneously abandons the West and destroys democracy. Turkey is changing in dramatic ways to America's great disadvantage.

The European Commission recently completed its latest report on Turkish progress toward meeting the EU's entry criteria. A decade ago the majority of Turks probably wanted to join the organization. That strong support appears to have dissipated some time ago. Certainly President Erdogan has lost whatever interest he might have once had.

Nevertheless, the EU is primed to generate reams of useless reports, such as this one. Whether Turkish "Transport policy" and "Regional policy and the coordination of structural instruments" measure up to European standards don't much matter. Turkey ain't going to meet the overall membership criteria. It won't be invited to join the EU. If it seemed to get close, the vetoes would come fast and furious, starting with Cyprus and Greece, since Ankara still effectively occupies a portion of the former, going back to the 1974 invasion.

But that doesn't mean the EU's efforts don't sometime have some unintended, ancillary value. For instance, the report's authors helpfully detail how Turkey is moving away from Western values. Noting the post-coup purge, the report cited the EU's advice, which had been completely ignored: "[A]ny allegation of wrongdoing should be established via transparent procedures in all individual cases. Individual criminal liability can only be established with full respect for the separation of powers, the full independence of the judiciary and the right of every individual to a fair trial, including through effective access to a lawyer. Turkey should ensure that any measure is taken only to the extent strictly required to the exigencies of the situation and in all cases stands the test of necessity and proportionality."

Right.

The European Commission also noted "Serious allegations of human rights violations and disproportionate use of force by the security forces in the south-east were increasingly reported. Many elected representatives and municipal executives in the south-east were suspended, removed from their duties, or arrested under terrorism-related charges, some of them on the basis of decrees." Civil society representatives "including human rights defenders, have been detained and there were credible claims of intimidation. A large number of organizations were closed."

Regarding the judicial system, "there has been backsliding in the past year, in particular with regard to the independence of the judiciary." Restraints on all manner of government powers were loosened. Judicial employees were removed and their assets frozen. Pre-trial detention was established. In the "very extensive suspensions, dismissals and arrests," after the attempted coup "there were reports of serious human rights violations, including alleged widespread ill-treatment and torture of detainees." The report also noted "serious concerns with regard to the vagueness of the criteria applied and evidence used" and reliance on "guilt by association."

Among the worst problems:

There has been serious backsliding in the past year in the area of freedom of expression. Selective and arbitrary application of the law, especially of the provision on national security and the fight against terrorism, is having a negative impact on freedom of expression. Ongoing and new criminal cases against journalists, writers or social media users, withdrawal of accreditations, high numbers of arrests of journalists as well as closure of numerous media outlets in the aftermath of the July attempted coup are serious concerns. Freedom of assembly continues to be overly restricted, in law and practice.

Indeed, these days Turkey has claimed the top spot in the number of journalists imprisoned, surging past China. Ankara has been a leading contender for years, even before the attempted coup. But it's now a clear and decisive number one.

These journalists are not the sort of leftist dilettantes many Americans think of when they hear the word "journalist." Many of the Turks arrested and imprisoned were exposing notable abuses of power and law. Human Rights Watch recently published its own report entitled: "Silencing Turkey's Media: The Government's Deepening Assault on Critical Journalism."

As of last month, reported HRW, "149 journalists and media workers now languish in Turkish jails—all but 18 of them in pretrial detention pending trial." Many are well-known and obviously are neither putschists nor Gulenists.

However, the Erdogan government's attack on its critics goes much further. Noted HRW:

140 media outlets and 29 publishing houses had been shut down via emergency decree, leaving more than 2,500 media workers and journalists unemployed. Hundreds of government-issued press accreditations have been cancelled and without accreditation journalistic activity in Turkey can be impeded. An unknown number of journalists had their passports revoked, thus banning them from all foreign travel.

The attack on the media is multi-faceted. Journalists face criminal prosecution for various crimes, including insulting public officials. Media people risk physical attack. Government officials routinely pressure media organizations to self-censor and/or fire journalists. The state also initiates "the government takeover or closure of private media companies." Companies face fines or restrictions on their distribution. Finally, websites are blocked.

One need not like the way journalists operate in America to realize that Erdogan's campaign to silence his most effective critics allows him to abuse his position even more. Noted HRW: "The journalists, editors and lawyers interviewed for this report all spoke about the stifling atmosphere in which they work and about the rapidly shrinking space for reporting on issues the government does not want covered." Like claims that Turkish intelligence aided the Islamic State and Erdogan's son profited from trafficking in ISIS oil.

There are worse countries, of course, but probably none that is formally allied with America and beneficiary of a U.S. promise to go to war. While the incoming Trump administration does not want to worsen bilateral relations, it should not approach the relationship with rosy illusions. The Pentagon remembers the Cold War era when Ankara was viewed as a foundation of NATO in confronting the Soviet Union. Those circumstances are gone, and the country has changed.

The president and his aides need to enter the bilateral relationship with open eyes. Erdogan is an authoritarian with extensive political and increasingly Islamist ambitions. In recent years, he has done more to impede than advance America's national interests. Indeed, these days he appears to be a better friend of Russia than the U.S.

Trust but verify, President Ronald Reagan said of the Soviet Union. Verify should be the motto for the Trump administration, in dealing with Ankara. Take nothing on trust, other than Sultan-wannabe Erdogan's turn to the Dark Side of the Force.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.*