

## Turkey: NATO's Loose Cannon

By: Ted Galen Carpenter

December 18, 2014

Grumbling about Turkey's conduct is growing among fellow NATO members. One grievance, Turkey's continuing occupation of northern Cyprus and the desecration of Christian religious sites there, is a long-standing source of irritation. Ankara's forces invaded Cyprus and amputated some 37 percent of that country's territory in 1974. Turkey subsequently established a client state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which to this day enjoys virtually no international recognition. Since Cyprus joined the European Union in 2004, it has become increasingly awkward for countries that are part of both that organization and NATO to tolerate the ongoing occupation of a fellow EU member.

Recent developments have made Turkey's stance on the Cyprus issue even more of an embarrassment, especially to the United States as NATO's leader. It is rather difficult for Washington to condemn Vladimir Putin's regime for annexing Crimea or setting up puppet states in Abkhazia and South Ossetia when a NATO member is guilty of similar behavior.

Disgruntled Americans also view Ankara's conduct toward ISIS with growing suspicion. Not only did President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government drag its feet about supporting air strikes against ISIS by the United States and other NATO allies, but there are indications that Turkish leaders have actively impeded measures to weaken the terrorist organization. The Erdogan regime certainly has done little to assist Kurdish defenders who continue to thwart the offensive by ISIS forces to conquer the city of Kobane on the Turkish-Syrian border.

And as if Ankara's behavior on the foreign policy front was not a sufficient worry, there are ominous signs of mounting authoritarianism in Turkey's domestic politics. Erdogan has conducted high-profile prosecutions of military leaders for allegedly plotting coups against the government, even when evidence for those allegations is exceedingly weak. Civil organizations and independent press outlets repeatedly find themselves under siege. Even onetime supporters of Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party are now castigated as enemies. At the end of October, Turkey's National Security Council branded the Gulen Movement, once the government's most powerful political ally, as a threat to national security. Erdogan personally presided over the meeting at which that charge was adopted.

The government's heavy hand is evident in other respects. When investigators conducted a wide-ranging probe of official corruption, leading to the resignation of four government ministers, Erdogan's administration retaliated by purging hundreds of police officials and prosecutors. It also pushed through laws giving the president tighter control over the judiciary.

The rising tide of domestic authoritarianism in Turkey is not a small concern. True, the Alliance has previously tolerated illiberal regimes and even outright dictatorships as members. Founding member Portugal was a quasi-fascist country under Antonio Salazar, and Greece groaned under a brutal military dictatorship in the late 1960s and early 1970s without forfeiting its NATO membership.

But it would be far more difficult in the twenty-first century for the Alliance to look the other way as a member succumbs to dictatorial impulses. During the Cold War, it was widely understood that NATO was first and foremost an anti-Soviet defense association. The commitment to liberal democracy, while important, was secondary. But in the post-Cold War era, NATO leaders repeatedly stress the organization's commitment to democracy and human rights. It would be more than a little embarrassing to have a Putin-style autocracy emerge in NATO's ranks, yet that is now a real danger with respect to Turkey.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of nine books and more than 600 articles and policy studies on international affairs.*