

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TURKEY



A briefing by
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“We are going to kill you because you are a traitor,” a security officer said to journalist Adem Arslanu during a scuffle between press and Turkish security forces.¹ Were that scene to take place back home in Turkey – one of the world’s worst jailers of journalists – it would not be out of place. But it took place at the steps of the prestigious Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. On March 31, 2016, Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to Brookings for a speech and brought with him the strong-armed displays of authoritarianism that have made the Western world uneasy about Turkey’s future.

For many in the American press unaccustomed to witnessing such displays of intimidation, the scene outside of Brookings was shocking. Those who have been following Turkey’s authoritarian turn, however, expected the export of such tactics. After all, Turkey’s prickly president is famous for his inability to wither criticism,² and surely he was not going to grow a thicker skin upon touching American soil.

Erdoğan has filed some 1,800 criminal complaints against people for "insulting the president" since he took power in 2014.³ From students to cartoonists, no one is safe from the wrath of the man President Obama once counted among his top trusted world leaders.⁴ That was four years ago. Now, President Obama is faced with the difficult task of balancing the need for Turkey’s cooperation in an unstable region with America’s commitment to promoting democratic values around the world.



Turkish security officials scuffle with the press in front of the Brookings Institution
Source: @MahirZeynalov

The New York Times recently admonished German Chancellor Angela Merkel for not making it “clear to Mr. Erdogan that Western freedoms were not on the table” in the latest European negotiations with Turkey.⁵ Yet the history of Western relations with modern Turkey demonstrate a pattern of Ankara consistently ignoring the rule of law and Western allies tolerating Turkey’s disdain for the rule of law. To be able to serve as a reliable Western ally, Turkey must make serious policy changes on all the issues below. These policy changes will only come if the United States makes it clear to Erdogan that the future of Turkish-US relations depends on Turkey’s full commitment to the rule of law.



Turkish journalists protest the arrest of their colleagues Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, in Ankara, November 27, 2015 (AP/Burhan Ozbilici)

ONE OF THE WORLD'S WORST JAILERS OF JOURNALISTS

Turkey's track record on free speech is so horrific that the Committee to Protect Journalists has a weekly tracker – the “Turkey Crackdown Chronicle”⁶ – documenting the constant threats and intimidation journalists suffer at the hands of Turkey's government.

A single tweet can get a reporter arrested.⁷ Erdogan believes social media, which has heralded a new era in reporting and mass communication, is a “social menace” which needs to be “eradicate[d]”⁸ – so much so that he has, at various times, banned Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Erdogan's hatred for the press is rooted in his desire to maintain power, even at the cost of free speech. As The Guardian has reported, “[p]olice officers and bureaucrats loyal to an exiled cleric based in the US are among dozens of people who have been arrested by Turkish authorities in an ongoing move against a group whose members have become bitter rivals of the president.”⁹ Erdogan has stated his policy that he would consider journalists and members of parliament “terrorists.”¹⁰

The crackdown on opposition took a stunning turn this year as the Turkish government took over one of the country' leading newspapers, *Today's Zaman*, after accusing it of “spreading propaganda to destabilize the Turkish state.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, the tone of

the paper markedly shifted after the government takeover, with the first government-controlled edition praising the president.¹²

The distrust of the media and of foreign journalists which pours out from Turkey's top officials poisons the well of public opinion. Since 2002, when Pew Research began polling sentiment in Turkey, 73% of the population dislikes the United States.¹³ As of 2014, their dislike for NATO is stands at 70% while EU bodies fare slightly better at 66% disapproval. Conspiracies regarding Western attempts to "control" Turkey abound;¹⁴ in 2013, Erdogan threatened to expel then US Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone Jr. because he perceived him as conspiring against him¹⁵ while in 2016, the US Embassy in Turkey was compelled to rebut a conspiracy theory that it knew of a bombing in Ankara (the Embassy had issued a travel warning prior to the attack).¹⁶



Smoke rises from the Kurdish city of Kobani in Syria near the Turkish border. (Photo: Reuters)

A LIABILITY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ISIS

The call Vice President Biden made to Turkey's President in October 2014 could not have been a pleasant one: he was calling to apologize for suggesting that Turkey, the UAE and other Middle Eastern countries were in part to blame for the rise of ISIS.¹⁷

Those in policy circles knew that Biden was apologizing for telling the truth. According to a report in the *The Daily Beast* in 2014, "Erdogan's domestic critics say he has to some degree helped the rise of ISIS, as well as other Islamic militants. At the very least Turkey has turned a blind eye to them as they emerged in the Syrian civil war and increasingly formed the vanguard in the fight to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad. Some critics argue that Turkey's intelligence agencies have gone farther and actively channeled arms supplies to the jihadists."¹⁸

Aykan Erdemir, former member of the Turkish Parliament and a nonresident senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, wrote in 2014 that "the AKP's Sunni sectarian vision led to a reckless policy that effectively paved a two-way "jihadist highway" on Turkey's border with Syria. There has been mounting evidence pointing to the collaboration of certain elements within the AKP and the Turkish state with ISIL on Turkey's southeastern frontier, as well as other jihadists in the region."¹⁹

This year, Jeffrey Goldberg, writing in *The Atlantic* about his landmark interview with President Obama, noted that the president once saw Erdogan as "the sort of moderate

Muslim leader who would bridge the divide between East and West—but Obama now considers him a failure and an authoritarian, one who refuses to use his enormous army to bring stability to Syria.”²⁰

A former ISIS member told Newsweek ““ISIS commanders told us to fear nothing at all because there was full cooperation with the Turks.” Number analysts have commented on financial ties between Turkey and terrorist networks.²¹ Jonathan Schanzer, vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, has reported that “Turkey’s 565-mile border with Syria has been a veritable open door for extremists, terrorist finance, and weapons since Syria’s civil war began raging in 2011. And the traffic runs both ways. Oil and antiquities are among the goods sold via middle men in Turkey, with the profits yielding crucial external financial streams for ISIS.”²² He has also reported that “Ankara may also be serving as a remote headquarters for the Palestinian terror group Hamas.”²³

Turkey’s feet-dragging in the fight against ISIS stems from its conflict with the Kurdish population in Turkey. As The Wall Street Journal, notes, “Turkey has taken issue with the U.S. for supporting the Syrian Kurds, or YPG, in the Islamic State fight, saying they are an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which both Washington and Ankara designate as a terrorist organization...The senior administration official said Turkey has recognized distinctions between the YPG and the PKK in the past but currently is choosing not to do so for political reasons.”²⁴

In conducting military action against Kurdish units that have proven most effective in fighting ISIS, Turkey undermines the effort to defeat ISIS.



Dmitry Serebryakov / AFP / Getty Images

GENOCIDE DENIAL

It was the first genocide of the 20th century: 1.5 million Armenians, up to 750,000 Greeks, and some 300,000 Assyrians died as part of a systematic campaign by the Ottoman Empire to extinguish Christian identity within its borders.²⁵ Three out of 4 Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire perished.

These tragic historical facts are not only officially denied by the Turkish government,²⁶ but declaring these facts in Turkey is a tantamount to a crime.

The International Association of Genocide Scholars has called the evidence supporting the existence of a genocide by the Ottoman Empire "abundant and overwhelming."²⁷ The organization points out that Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide in 1944, "cited the Turkish extermination of the Armenians and the Nazi extermination of the Jews as defining examples of what he meant by genocide."

In the United States, Turkish genocide denial has become a lucrative business for pro-Turkey lobbyists and activists. As Peter Balakian noted in *The Los Angeles Times*, Turkey "spends a fortune annually to stop scholarly and cultural events about the genocide, even going so far as to pay former [Rep]. Richard Gephardt's Gephardt Group more than \$1 million each year to lobby against congressional resolutions on the genocide. Turkey has threatened several times, most recently in 2007, to close Turkish missile bases to U.S. airplanes if Congress passes a simple non-binding statement acknowledging the events of 1915 as genocide."²⁸



OCCUPYING CYPRUS FOR 42 YEARS

The Cyprus issue is the second longest standing issue before the U.N. Security Council. Nicosia, Cyprus is the only divided capital city in the world.²⁹ A U.N. Buffer Zone stretches across Nicosia's streets and across the whole of the Republic of Cyprus, separating the unoccupied portion of the country on the south from the Turkish-occupied portion in the north.³⁰

Since Turkey illegally invaded Cyprus in 1974, dozens of UN and European Parliament resolutions have called on the Turkish government to remove its 40,000 troops from Cyprus and help reunify the country. The so-called Annan plan – named after former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan – was put to a vote in 2004 and failed overwhelmingly as it would have formalized Turkey's military presence on the island, given it the right to interfere with Cypriot politics and governance, and imposed unfair costs on Greek Cypriots.³¹

In the past three years, new impetus has been given to solving the Cyprus problem. The Government of President Nicos Anastasiades has aggressively sought progress in reunification negotiations – negotiating a joint statement to serve as a roadmap for peace, putting forth confidence building measures, and encouraging the international community to provide greater support. The discovery of significant natural gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean has given Turkey and Turkish-Cypriots a financial incentive to resolve the Cyprus issue before all other regional players (Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Greece) move on without them.

Vice President Biden's personal intervention in Cyprus and the fact that Turkish Cypriots replaced their hardline, intransigent leader with a new more moderate one added to this sense of optimism. Yet, as usual, Turkey is hampering the peace process.³² Beyond refusing to remove all Turkish troops, it is insisting on maintaining guarantor powers (the same guarantor powers that led to the 1974 invasion). Greece³³ and the United Kingdom³⁴ have both stated that they would relinquish their guarantor powers over Cyprus.



MISTREATING RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

In 2015, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom lists Turkey as a “Tier 2” country, reporting that “the overall landscape for democracy and human rights has deteriorated significantly in the last two years, with troubling implications for freedom of religion or belief in Turkey.³⁵ In joining the exclusive Tier 2 club, Turkey joins Afghanistan, Cuba, Malaysia, Russia, and another five countries which “require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by governments.”³⁶

All religions in Turkey “are subject to state control that limits all groups’ rights to own and maintain places of worship, train clergy, and offer religious education.”³⁷ It is Turkey’s Christian, Jewish and Alevi minorities that feel the brunt of this clampdown on religious freedom.

The Greek Orthodox Halki Theological Seminary, shuttered by Turkey in 1971, remains closed. Turkey’s Greek Orthodox population has dwindled to about 2,500 in country of 77 million.³⁸

On occupied Cyprus, Turkish troops have defaced Christian cemeteries, turned churches into stables and nightclubs, and have otherwise engaged in the “vast destruction and pillage of religious sites.”³⁹



PROVOCATIVE ACTIONS IN THE AEGEAN

Since 2014, air space violations by Turkey have surged.⁴⁰ In April, Turkish planes flew into Greek airspace 22 times in just 24 hours.⁴¹ Greece's Foreign Ministry has lodged formal complaints with Ankara over the flurry of Turkish overflights.⁴²

Turkey's provocative behavior is not limited to the air. In October 2014, Turkey issued a Navigational Telex, or NAVTEX, confirming that Turkey would send a seismographic vessel to explore areas within the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Republic of Cyprus's southern waters. The research vessel, accompanied by two military vessels, was sent into the waters off the southern coast of Cyprus on October 7th.⁴³ The move prompted international outcry, and in November 2014, Representatives Carolyn B. Maloney (NY-12), Gus M. Bilirakis (FL-12), Ted Deutch (FL-21) and 14 of their House colleagues called on Secretary of State John Kerry to "strongly oppose the invasion of waters off the southern coast of Cyprus by Turkish ships performing seismic tests for natural gas."

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