



Time to Kick Turkey Out of NATO

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The egregious violation of freedom of the press in Turkey has reached a mammoth proportion that places Turkey among the most oppressive nations for journalists. It is sadder than sad that the US and the EU, who champion free press as one of the main pillars of democracy, have largely left Turkey's President Erdogan free to crush not only free press, but also freedom of speech and peaceful demonstrations.

The irony here is that Turkey, as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has violated every provision of NATO's founding treaty regarding human rights. Indeed, each member state is required to fully adhere to "...safeguard[ing] the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." To be sure, Erdogan has given himself license to mock these principles without any noteworthy rebuke from other NATO members.

It is time to consider kicking Turkey out of NATO, regardless of how difficult and complicated this far-reaching measure may be. Turkey has long since forsaken Western values while becoming an increasingly zealous Islamic state. Indeed, contrary to Erdogan's manipulative narrative about Turkey's presumed democracy, the country under his watch is governed by an authoritarian regime that has no place among Western democracies.

The violation of free press and the systematic undermining of human rights demands that the West reevaluate its relationship with Turkey and stop searching for excuses to justify its self-conceit about Erdogan's outrageous behavior. Here is a dossier of Erdogan's gross violations of freedom of the press and his suppression of democratic values:

Turkey today has become the global leader of incarcerated journalists. The Stockholm Center for Freedom, a Sweden-based advocacy agency, reports that as of July 2017 the Turkish government has arrested 228 journalists and convicted an additional twenty-five. Reporters Without Borders' 2017 World Press Freedom Index ranks Turkey 155 out of 180 countries.

President Erdogan has all but silenced any media outlets that have attempted any scrutiny of his policies, particularly his crackdown on anyone whom he perceives to be

an enemy. As such, he has systematically denied the Turkish public any unbiased source of information from domestic newspapers, radio, and television.

He uses the criminal justice system to prosecute journalists on false charges of terrorism, insulting the president, or fabricated crimes against the state. Many journalists have been charged and convicted for reporting that the government is supplying weapons to the Islamic State (ISIS), when in fact the government did just that, and turned a blind eye to ISIS' oil being smuggled into the country.

Erdogan regularly exerts tremendous pressure on various media organizations to dismiss journalists who write anything critical of the government, such as those who worked for the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*. Investigative journalism is viewed as treason against the state, which has *de facto* choked off any effort by journalists to investigate any wrongdoing by officials, especially in the rampant number of corruption cases that included several ministers and his own son.

He took over or closed down private media companies, including Feza Publications (parent company of *Zaman* and *Cihan*), and in many cases assigned trustees to media organizations, which is absolutely illegal and against Turkey's own constitution, which he labored so hard to pass.

Many of Turkey's business tycoons, who have extensive media holdings, are given major inner-city construction projects in exchange for keeping their reporters in check and forbidding them from publishing critical commentary about the government.

He regularly targets journalists and media outlets associated with the Gülen movement, which the government accuses of being a terrorist organization. Human Rights Watch reported that he closed nearly 170 media organizations and publishing outlets under the state emergency law that was enacted following the failed military coup in July 2016, severely undermining every aspect of human rights and the rule of law.

Erdogan targeted Kurdish journalists in particular and pro-Kurdish political activists who have expressed support for Kurdish rights, including prominent academics and mayors, accusing them of having links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In fact, none of the accused committed any wrongdoing—their arrests were arbitrary and lacked any semblance of legitimacy.

He stifled not only freedom of the press, but free speech in general. According to the Twitter Transparency Report, Erdogan demanded that Twitter remove any offending posts. Of the 33,593 Twitter accounts reported in 2016, over 23,000 were reported by the Turkish government, more than all other countries put together.

Fearing retribution from the police, even private news outlets no longer dare to report on anything which is not to the liking of the government—including demon-

strations or clashes related to the Kurdish problem. Self-censorship by journalists has become a common practice, while quietening colleagues who try to protect the basic ethics of journalism.

Given that public demonstration is another form of free expression, Erdogan ensures that no demonstration can take place without a specific permit. In 2015, a bill was passed allowing the police to use excessive force to quell demonstrations and incarcerate those who participate in unauthorized demonstrations for up to 48 hours, presumably to maintain public order. Protesters wearing full or even partial masks could face up to five years in prison, especially if they are accused of disseminating propaganda for terrorist organizations.

Journalists are attacked for merely advocating for the resumption of peace talks with the PKK, or if they refer to PKK members as militants rather than terrorists. The Erdogan government has put freedom of the press under siege, and is bent on destroying journalism completely.

Erdogan's crackdown on press freedom, however, is not limited to Turkish journalists and reporters; it has expanded beyond Turkey's borders. As a case in point, Turkish consular officials in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, asked Turks in the country to report on any insult directed against Erdogan. Moreover, Turkey has targeted many foreign journalists, among them a French photojournalist who was arrested and expelled, and another reporter for a German television station who was denied entry into the country.

Turkish state officials have accused European and Western media organizations of being hypocritical in their representation of the media in Turkey, as Western states have their own standards of censorship on sensitive matters related to national security.

Although on a couple of occasions the European Union issued scathing reports about Turkey's serious backsliding on press freedom, the EU and the US (along with the Council of Europe and the UN Human Rights Council) have unfortunately taken no punitive measures to stop Erdogan's rampage against free press.

Sadly, the European community and the US are betraying their democratic values. They continue to treat Erdogan with kid gloves because he is presumably an important player against ISIS, and because he is allowing the US and its allies to use Turkey's Incirlik Air Base to launch air attacks against ISIS.

To be sure, Erdogan has been successful in blackmailing the West. He skillfully uses his leverage to control the flow of Syrian refugees to Europe and cement Turkey's geostrategic position as the hub for the transfer of oil and gas to Europe.

Turkey under Erdogan is not only violating freedom of the press, individual liberties, and the public's right for peaceful demonstration; every stratum of Turkey's governing authorities—including the police, the judiciary, the bureaucracy and the political echelon of the AK Party—is corrupt to the core and irredeemable.

NATO cannot allow one of its member states to erode the alliance from within and still expect it to be a viable force that can maintain and protect European security and its moral values.

No country led by a dictator that attacks US allies—such as the Kurds in Syria—should remain a member of NATO, and no country that sold weapons to ISIS should be a member of NATO.

No country that cozies up to and buys weapons from America's enemy—Russia—should continue to be a member of NATO, and no country which is being transformed into an extremist Islamic state by a zealous leader should maintain its place as a member of NATO.

And no country that has violated every tenet of democracy, engages in gross human rights abuses, and wreaks havoc on its population deserves to stay in the NATO alliance.

Turkey under Erdogan is no longer a reliable nor trustworthy partner, and has become a liability rather than a viable and constructive member of the organization, which could severely impact NATO's cohesiveness, effectiveness, and preparedness to meet any threat to European security.

For this reason, NATO should warn Erdogan that unless he reverses his policies and reinstates basic democratic principles, especially human rights and freedom of the press, Turkey will be kicked out of NATO.

Certainly, I am not holding my breath that NATO will act on this anytime soon, but I feel very strongly that a discussion on this critical issue within NATO should take place.

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