

# Analyzing EU's stance towards Turkey after the military operation in Syria

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## Introduction

NATO welcomed Turkey in 1952 to contain Communist expansion after the Cold War and gain a foothold close to the Middle East. Turkey's relationship with NATO has been fluctuating but survived all these years for mutual benefits. Turkey has the second largest army within the organization after the US and provides permanent naval assistance to NATO missions. Turkey also hosts many NATO initiatives. In 2018, Turkey contributed \$101 million to the NATO common funding.

The European Union, which Turkey still aspires to formally join, expressed their anger over Turkey's offensive actions in Syria in October 2019, and threatened sanctions particularly after President Erdogan's warning that he would "open the gates" and send 3.6 million refugees to Europe if they did not support him. European countries fear that the assault on Kurdish forces could trigger a devastating shift in the region's balance of power, and strengthen Islamic State terrorist group.

Europe also warned Turkey that its action would create another humanitarian crisis and have severe consequences. The World Food Programme of United Nations has released warnings that Turkish attack on Syria has already displaced 70,000 Syrians. However Turkish Foreign Minister informed NATO members that no other NATO country had suffered more from the terrorist attacks than Turkey.

## EU's stance towards Turkey

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Turkey's offensive in Syria and threatened sanctions particularly after President Erdogan's warning that he would "open the gates" and send 3.6 million refugees to Europe if they did not support him. Western countries fear that the assault on Kurdish forces could trigger a devastating shift in the region's balance of power, and strengthen Islamic State terrorist group.

Condemning Turkey's action, European Council President Donald Tusk warned Turkey and made it clear that, EU will never accept that refugees are weaponized and used to blackmail the European state.

Other European leaders also condemned Turkey's actions and demanded that the UN's security council must immediately address the issue. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte accused Erdogan of blackmail and said the military operation should immediately end.

French leaders even proposed economic sanctions on Turkey, and Former French President François Hollande has asked the NATO military alliance to strip Turkey of its membership for launching the attack in Syria. French leaders also officially termed the Kurds as "allies who led the fight against Daesh (Islamic State)". French leaders vowed to take serious measures in this regard and cannot let the Kurds to be massacred by Turkish Forces.

Sweden's parliament also demanded EU arms embargo, as Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde said, Turkey has violated international law, destabilized the situation and risked having great humanitarian consequences. Netherlands has also decided to withhold all license applications for the export of military goods to Turkey pending the course of the situation. Greek Prime Minister

Mitsotakis also called on NATO to increase naval patrols in the Aegean Sea after a threat by Turkey to open Europe's doors to more than three million migrants.

However, countries like Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria opposed majority of the EU states' stance towards Turkey and voiced against sanctions and rejected EU statement criticizing Turkey. Hungarian Foreign Minister urged EU to have a dialogue with Turkey and address their concerns.

Bulgarian leaders also condemned the criticism and said it will not stop a wave of refugees from Turkey if Ankara opens its borders. Both Serbia and Bulgaria considers Turkey a vital partner and view their relations with Turkey more important.

### Turkey's concerns

It seemed Turkey was ready to even negotiate to get a membership in EU but a lot changed after Erdoğan seen as champion of the Muslim Brotherhood whose government is accused of democratic backsliding and criticized for crackdown on journalists and political dissenters.

Dissimilar to Turkey, Kurd people are not as religious and conservative (such as their women are quite modern and in fact fight alongside men) and have views that are close to the western states and uphold western values of democracy which is why they are naturally liked by the US and Europeans and were chosen as allies in the region to fight ISIS.

As Turkey was about to launch its Operation in Northern Syria on October 8, 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron held meeting with Jihane Ahmed, a representative of Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

French officials called the meeting as "France's solidarity with Kurds in their fight against Islamic State in the region", although, the two sides also discussed the Turkish operation and reviewed a

possible cooperation against Turkey.

**France remains "very worried" about the prospect of a Turkish military operation in Syria.**

However, the French officials also conceded that the meeting was also an opportunity to reiterate that France remains "very worried" about the prospect of a Turkish military operation in Syria.

On October 09, 2019 the French Consul General to the Kurdistan Region, Olivier Decottignies during a meeting with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani assured him of all possible support to Kurdish people and administration to meet with new situation. The meeting at KDP headquarters outside Erbil was also attended by several other Kurdish officials including security chiefs.

Barzani who also maintain working relationship with Turkey was reluctant to ask for any military support but sought French and European support against Turkey's "safe zone" policy.

In a clear message to Turkey, it was announced in France that French naval frigate has set from coast of Toulon, France to Cypriot waters to take part in French-Cyprus naval maneuvers the east Mediterranean.

The French Naval ships arrived at a time when Turkey decided to send its own ship, escorted by warships, to start drilling off Turkish Cyprus region where Greece-backed Cyprus had licensed French energy company Total and Italian partner Eni to explore for gas.

The European Union has joined Greece, and Greek Cyprus governments to condemned Turkey's gas search. On October 12, 2019 Greek Cypriot Defense Minister Savvas Angelides also made clear of their agenda that the Cyprus-French maneuver

was aimed at sending a direct message to Turkey.

### **France and Germany's decision to halt arms export to Turkey**

France and Germany have announced to temporarily halt arms exports to Turkey over the country's military incursion into northern Syria. According to German leaders, their Federal Government has announced not to issue any new permits for all military equipment that could be used by Turkey in Syria. Florence Parly, the French Minister of the Armed Forces, also issued a similar statement. France announced that, pending the cessation of the Turkish offensive in North-East Syria, France has decided to suspend any plans to export to Turkey war materials that could be used in the context of this offensive.

European members of the UN Security Council also called for an immediate halt to the offensive and expressed deep concerns over the Turkish military operation. The UNSC's five European members — Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Poland made a joint statement, and urged that renewed armed hostilities in the northeast will further undermine the stability of the whole region, exacerbate civilian suffering and provoke further displacements in the region, which may cause more troubles for the European nations.

In addition, some 20,000 people took to the streets of Paris and other European cities on October 12. Marching under the Kurdish flag, they called Turkish President Erdogan a terrorist and even protested against Donald Trump who they felt have betrayed the Kurd people of the region.

European countries heavily rely on Ankara to curb the arrival of refugees into Europe following a 2016 agreement under which Turkey agreed to prevent refugees from leaving towards Europe in exchange for six billion euros (\$6.63bn) – most of which has been disbursed – and visa-free travel for its citizens, but has frequently criticized the lack of assistance from Brussels.

Turkish President's threat has worried the European leaders, some of whom agree that Erdogan is not bluffing, and that Turkey could send about 500,000 refugees immediately. Europe might be angry at this invasion of Syria but Europe is powerless in front of the refugee threat but the Americans are not, and President Trump consider this not a direct challenge for the United States. The European leaders hope to convince President Trump to make a deal with Turkish President Erdogan and use American power to keep him in line. However, the Europeans are also aware of the fact America is least concerned about Europe, and more eager to deal with North Korean, Iran and Afghan issues.

**Turkey has legitimate security concerns, NATO expect Turkey to act with restraint and focus on the common enemy – Da'esh**

On October 11, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Turkey and met Turkish President and Foreign Minister and urged to avoid any unilateral actions that may further destabilize the region, escalate tensions and case human suffering. He underlined that while Turkey has legitimate security concerns, NATO expect Turkey to act with restraint and focus on the common enemy – Da'esh. However, NATO realizes the importance of Turkey and appreciated Turkey's commitments and contributions to NATO.

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However, NATO disappointed Turkey more than once over the decades such as when the U.S. refused to side with the Turkish invasion of

Cyprus in 1964, when Germany accused Turkey of killing civilians in its battle with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the 1990s, and also due to America's refusal to hand over Fethullah Gulen.

Turkey's fight against terrorism, particularly the PKK, has been seen as the west as an act of brutality against civilians whereas Ankara is furious over the U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which Turkey deems is dominated by YPG/PKK (a faction of Syria's Kurd) with links to militants who have waged insurgency in Turkey.

There have also been some small but humiliating incidents for Turkey such as in 2017 when a picture of Turkey's founding leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was placed among the pictures of "enemy states" during a joint NATO military exercise in Norway. NATO chief later apologized to Turkey.

## Conclusion

The U.S. remains the decisive actor in the conflict and most European countries depend on the United States and US-led NATO alliance. The EU could not do much against Turkey after the launch of Syrian operation mainly due to the fact that the U.S. did not support any firm actions against Turkey as it would lead to further destabilization of the whole region and threaten the U.S. interests in the Middle East.

One important reason that the U.S. President has conceded to Turkish pressure is that the U.S. is not in a position to risk lives of U.S. soldiers in Syria particularly at a time when presidential elections is due in the U.S. and also Donald Trump's Middle East peace initiative has fell flat while his dream to reach an agreement with North Korea also broken apart.

Incirlik - the US air base in Turkey - is storing reportedly 50 air-dropped thermonuclear bombs in southern Turkey, less than 100 miles from the Syrian border where this conflict is taking place.

The reason why the U.S. or any European country would not provoke a direct confrontation with Turkey is because Ankara has over four hundred thousand strong armed forces. Turkey's Air Force is considered one of the strongest in the region. Of 333 combat aircraft, Turkey has 300 F-16 Fighting Falcons, 53 older generation F-5 fighter planes, 280 fighter/ground attack planes (variants of the F-16) and 31 U.S.-origin C-130 transport aircraft. Recently, United States suspended Turkey's involvement in the F-35 program in a dispute over Ankara's decision to buy Russian S-400 air defense systems.

However, the U.S. weapons are being used on both sides of the current conflict in Syria. The rifles, ammunition, and rocket launchers being used by Kurdish forces are U.S.-supplied as well as some of the Turkey's fighter planes, tanks, and bombs. Syrian opposition – including Syrian Kurdish forces – have received roughly \$2 billion in U.S. "train and equip" assistance, including a \$300 million request in 2019, according to Center for International Policy's Security Assistance Monitor.

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