

Erdogan the Arsonist: The Dilemma of U.S.-Turkey Relations

How far is the United States prepared to tolerate Turkey's growing human rights abuses and incendiary behavior?

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The Swiss writer Max Fritsch called his play *Biedermann and the Fire Raisers* (1958) “a didactic play without a lesson.” The main character, Gottlieb Biedermann, is an upright citizen and hair tonic merchant. Two ill-intentioned vagrants wheedle their way into his home, store gasoline in the attic and Biedermann even provides them with the matches to burn the house down. When confronted with solid evidence of the arsonists’ intentions, Gottlieb Biedermann finds every excuse not to take action. “All I want is some peace and quiet, not more.” He argues, “If I report those two guys to the police, I’ll make them my enemies. What good will that do me? On the other hand, if I go up there and invite them to dinner, then we’ll be friends.”

On an eerily similar note, the German weekly magazine, *Stern*, has [accused](#) Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, of being an “arsonist” and stirring up trouble not only in Turkey but also in Syria and Germany in an attempt to stay in power. The United States is faced with a dilemma similar to Biedermann’s with regard to Turkey and [a planned \\$20 billion arms package](#), including forty F-16 fighter jets and seventy-nine upgrade kits. On the one hand,

the United States needs to keep on good terms with Turkey because of its NATO membership and key strategic position in the Middle East. On the other, how far is it prepared to tolerate Turkey's [growing human rights abuses](#) and [incendiary behavior](#) in the neighborhood?

In the recent [hearing](#) of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on countering Russian aggression in Ukraine, Senator Jeanne Shaheen raised the issue of Turkey's continued failure to ratify Sweden and Finland's NATO accession agreement. She explained that she and a number of her colleagues were opposed to the F-16 deal unless Turkey ratified the agreement. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland agreed Congress was more likely to look favorably on the deal after ratification.

What Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlet Cavusoglu has stated are [two separate issues](#) seems to have degenerated into a quid pro quo deal. After the Senate hearing, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel [denied](#) this was the case. In addition, he emphasized the Biden administration's support for Turkey as an important NATO ally in providing what Victoria Nuland called "security enhancements."

However, Jeanne Shaheen and twenty-six other senators confirmed the transactional nature of the deal by [informing President Joe Biden](#) they are not prepared to greenlight the sale until Turkey agrees to Sweden and Finland's accession.

Turkish columnist Burak Bekdil, who is also a Turkey correspondent for Defense News, has in [a trenchant analysis](#) undermined the illusion that Turkey under Erdogan is a dependable NATO ally in the struggle against Russia. On the contrary, Bekdil concludes: "The Erdoğan-Putin bond has two main pillars. One is pragmatism: They both strategically, politically, and economically benefit. The other is ideological: They both hate the West."

Clifford Smith from the Middle East Forum believes Erdogan's reluctance to endorse Finland and Sweden's NATO membership is a refusal to "[stay bribed](#)," but the truth lies elsewhere. Senator Shaheen's assessment that domestic

politics play a major role is correct, but a further dimension has been added after [ta Koran burning stunt](#) in Stockholm.

When Turkey invaded and occupied the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northwestern Syria in 2018, Erdogan had hit upon a surefire winner, as [nearly 90 percent](#) of Turkey's citizens supported the incursion. Carnegie Europe's Francesco Sicardi has, in [a study](#) of how Syria changed Turkey's foreign policy, shown how four military operations in Syria have improved Erdogan's approval ratings.

Russian economist Sergei Gurlev [has written](#) of a similar pattern in Putin's Russia. When Russia's GDP growth slowed to almost zero and Vladimir Putin's approval ratings dropped. According to Gurlev, Putin decided to address an economic problem with a non-economic solution, the annexation of Crimea, which boosted his popularity.

For this reason, Erdogan is seeking [Russia's permission](#) for a new cross-border operation against the U.S.-backed Kurdish YPG militia in Syria. He has also signaled [a rapprochement](#) with Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

Likewise, Erdogan's initial objection to Sweden and Finland's NATO membership was that they housed [terrorist organizations](#), which was quickly [elevated](#) by his foreign policy advisor and spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, to "a matter of national security" for Turkey.

Now, Erdogan has found a new card to play, the religious card, which is guaranteed to have popular appeal. As a young man, Erdogan was president of the Istanbul youth group of the National Salvation Party, founded by Necmettin Erbakan, the father of political Islam in Turkey, which was closed in the 1980 military coup.

When Erbakan later opened the Welfare Party (RP), which became the Turkish parliament's largest, Erdogan was RP's mayor of Istanbul, where he [famously declared](#) in 1997, "Democracy is not our aim. It is the vehicle."

The following year the RP was dissolved by the Constitutional Court for being a “centre of activities contrary to the principles of secularism.” Erdogan was also sent to prison for four months “for using religion to incite hatred” after quoting [a nationalist poem from 1912](#) (“The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers”).

Erdogan has [made it clear](#) to Sweden, “If you do not show respect to the religious beliefs of the Republic of Türkiye or Muslims, you will not receive any support for NATO [membership] from us.” Consequently, Finland [may have to go it alone](#) if Turkey blocks Sweden’s accession.

The [outrage](#) provoked by the incident in Stockholm has caused the U.S. government to issue [a travel warning](#) about possible retaliatory attacks by terrorists in Turkey. In return, the Turkish foreign ministry has [warned its citizens](#) against possible Islamophobic, xenophobic, and racist attacks in the United States and Europe.

In Max Fritsch’s play there is a Greek chorus of firemen who warn: “Wise is man and able to ward off most perils if, sharp of mind and alert, he heeds signs of coming disaster in time.”