



## What Turkey wants:

Turkey's objection to Finland and Sweden's NATO Membership Applications

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### Takeaways

- Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, unexpectedly vetoed Sweden, and Finland's joint NATO membership bid.
- Turkey wants both countries, but predominantly Sweden, to cease supporting the PKK (including affiliated organizations) and FETO, and reaffirm their stance on PKK as a terror organization; to curb PKK activities domestically and resolve pending extradition and deportation cases, and lift the weapons embargo.
- The process involving the three countries is also closely linked to the US–Turkey relationship.
- Turkey will lift its veto at the end, but most likely not before the parliamentary and presidential elections, currently scheduled for May 2023
- On 6 February 2023, a catastrophic Mw 7.8 earthquake struck southern and central Turkey, as well as parts of Syria. It is still unclear how potential political consequences of the earthquake could affect the accession process.

In May 2022 NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that: “the process for Finland and Sweden to join NATO could be very quick”. Further, he highlighted that he “didn't expect Turkey to hold up the process”.<sup>1</sup> However, the application letter had barely left

the capitals of Finland and Sweden before President Erdoğan publicly, and in quite a confrontational manner objected to the two countries' NATO membership bids.<sup>2</sup> The objection and how it was announced was highly unexpected, even to President Erdoğan's own ministers

who are said to have been taken by surprise just as much as the rest of the alliance.<sup>3</sup>

This issue of IFS Insights takes a closer look at Sweden and Finland's accession process, with a specific focus on the Turkish leadership's perspective.

Initially, Turkey's objections to Sweden and Finland were met with understanding in the alliance and Stoltenberg declared that Turkey's concerns were legitimate.<sup>4</sup> The general perception was that the issue would soon be resolved. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated to this respect that he was "very confident that we will reach consensus".<sup>5</sup>

In June 2022, Sweden, Finland, and Turkey signed a trilateral memorandum. In this written document Sweden and Finland declared not to provide support to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its military wing the People's Defense Units (YPG), or the Fetullah Gulen Terrorist Network (FETO). Further, Sweden and Finland reaffirmed their stand on PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party) as a terrorist organization and pledged to investigate and stop PKK recruitment, financing, and disinformation activities domestically. They also promised to resolve Turkey's pending deportation and extradition requests. Finally, Sweden and Finland announced that they would strengthen their national laws against terrorism and work in accordance with NATO policy on this matter. Finally, Sweden and Finland would end their embargoes on Turkey and freely export arms.

So far Turkey seems to be relatively content with the measures taken by Finland, but not with Sweden's progress.

First and foremost, the key issue in Ankara's view is about holding the enemies of an ally accountable. In this case it means that Sweden and Finland, as allied countries, should acknowledge PKK and FETO as groups threatening an ally, and consequently not support PKK and FETO, but strive to curb their activities on Swedish and Finnish soils. In other words, Sweden and Finland should be obliged to hold these organizations accountable. This perspective has a long history and is shared across the political spectrum in Turkey.<sup>6</sup> The issue is deeply connected to the Syrian case where the Turkish government maintains that some of its

NATO allies act in ways that harm the country's national security.

This applies, in particular, to US support to and partnering with the YPG in the fight against ISIS. Turkey (and the US<sup>7</sup>) considers YPG to be the Syrian branch of the PKK. PKK is labeled a terror organization by Turkey, the EU, and the US, as well as several other countries. Syria's critical importance to Turkey's national security was intensified in the period from 2015 to 2017 when Turkey suffered from a wave of terror attacks by ISIS and PKK and affiliates, in which more than 400 people inside Turkey were killed.

Sweden has differentiated between PYD/YPG in Syria, and PKK. Turkey claims that Sweden has supported PYD/YPG in Syria both militarily and financially, and in a controversial case from 2016 showcased evidence to this end.<sup>8</sup> The Swedish MFA strongly rejects these accusations and state that they have extended humanitarian aid towards the Syrian crisis in general and support to the fight against ISIS, but not supported any political or military groups inside Syria directly.<sup>9</sup> However, a document written by the Swedish Social Democrat Party in 2021 as part of a deal with the independent MP<sup>10</sup> Amineh Kakabaveh of Kurdish ethnicity, to secure her support for the government,<sup>11,12</sup> surfaced, and strengthened President Erdoğan's position. The document was an agreement to intensify the Social Democrat Party's support to YPG/PYD/YPJ in its fight against ISIS. It also characterized as unacceptable any labeling of the groups and its members as terrorists by some state actors.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Turkey has long held grievances towards Sweden and alleged that it harbours PKK terrorists, allowing them to operate unrestricted and further their cause from Sweden. Sweden awarded many Kurds asylum as they fled Turkey in the 1980s and 90s during the worst period of violent clashes between PKK and the Turkish government. Many Kurdish diasporas around Europe have successfully continued their political struggle, but the Swedish diaspora has been leading in this respect. Its activity has also included support to the militant cause. Turkey has been deeply irritated at successive Swedish governments' lack of action in curbing such activity over the years.

When a new coalition on the right took power in Sweden, new optimism was injected into the process. It seemed like the new leadership in Sweden and their Turkish counterparts had a better tone that could aid the process. However, soon Stockholm accused President Erdoğan of piling on new demands whereas Ankara replied that it needed proof of concrete actions regarding weapons trade and of restraints on PKK finances, recruitment, and disinformation. To complicate things further, allegations of extraditions and deportations from Sweden to Turkey and accusations on curbing freedom of speech and other liberal rights has created a domestic backlash in Sweden. This has made it harder for the Swedish government to maneuver in the process, and various statements from the Turkish leadership only fueled the debate.

Recently the situation took a turn for the worse when first, in mid-January, an effigy made out to look like President Erdoğan was hung upside-down during a protest that, according to the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*,<sup>14</sup> was staged by *Rojavakommittéerna* (the Rojava committee in Sweden).<sup>15</sup> The Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson denounced the act as “sabotage” against Sweden’s bid to join NATO.<sup>16</sup> In a second incident in Stockholm only about a week later, a Swedish/Danish provocateur and right-wing extremist, Rasmus Paludan, who leads the Danish far-right political party *Hard Line*, burned a copy of *The Quran* outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm.<sup>17</sup> Swedish authorities stated that the protest was legal under the country’s free speech legislation but condemned the act and calling it “appalling.” The leadership in Turkey responded by calling off meetings, both a scheduled bilateral meeting between the defense ministers of Sweden and Turkey,<sup>18</sup> and a planned meeting within the trilateral group.<sup>19</sup> President Erdoğan went on to state that Sweden should not expect any support from Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Later on, various statements both from officials in Finland and Turkey indicated that Turkey might approve Finland’s application separately. Should Finland agree to separate its accession process from Sweden’s, this would take some pressure off Turkey and extend its leverage in what would in effect become a prolonged

process. However, Finland, Sweden and NATO officials have stated that the two Nordic countries still stand together and that they will join NATO together.

As of late February 2023, this is where the matter stands.

According to an article from the Washington Institute there are four key issues to watch: 1. The implementation of Sweden’s new anti-terrorism law that comes into force in July 2023. 2. Actual actions to curb PKK fundraising within Sweden. In this regard, a recent criminal case, where a man was charged with terror fundraising for the PKK, might show that Sweden’s attention to this issue has been raised.<sup>21</sup> 3. The anti-incitement provisions of the memorandum. This is directly relevant to the latest events in Sweden and the question is what, if any, steps the Swedish government will take. Finland has recently, in new amendments of its Criminal Code, criminalized public incitement related to terrorist offenses as a separate offence. Will Sweden do something similar? 4. The negotiations between the two counterparts regarding pending extradition and deportation requests.<sup>22</sup> As evident by recent events, reaching common ground on these matters is undoubtedly a tall order by itself, but the question of Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO does not rest solely in the relations among these three countries.

The process is closely linked to the relationship between the US and Turkey and specifically to the approval in the US Congress of the Turkish request to buy 40 Lockheed Martin-made F-16 fighter jets and nearly 80 modernization kits. If this goes through, it is argued that Turkey would come one step closer to lifting the veto<sup>23</sup> even though the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, claims that these two processes are not linked.<sup>24</sup> This has also been confirmed by the American side.<sup>25</sup> However, on February 2, 2023, a bipartisan group of senators warned President Biden that they would not approve the F-16 sale until Turkey approves the accession bids of Sweden and Finland.<sup>26</sup>

Another more complex issue is the dynamic between Turkey and the US in Northeast Syria. Turkey has for long been deeply annoyed by the US alliance with YPG to fight ISIS. Turkey



has nevertheless, through several cross-border military operations, pushed YPG back from Turkey's border with Syria. These operations have aimed to deny YPG and PKK control over several territories along the border, and hence, to inhibit PKK from launching attacks into Turkey. Thus, US and Turkey's interests in Syria clash on this issue, which is a major conflict in the overall relationship. However, the geopolitical dynamic in Syria is changing due to Russia's war on Ukraine. While the picture is still very unclear, this change in dynamics could constitute an opportunity for Turkey and the US to reach an understanding regarding Syria.<sup>27</sup> As noted above, Turkey wants its allies' support in national security concerns. The situation in Syria, and US actions there, are perceived to the contrary. If Ankara and Washington reach an understanding, this may affect how the Turkish leadership perceives the expediency of making an example of Sweden.

A third key issue not related to Sweden or Finland is Turkey's upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023. Some analysts have linked President Erdoğan's veto to an effort to attract voters. For sure, his powerful message when he announced his opposition could have influenced some segments of his voter base and gained him some popular points, but it is doubtful that there are significant long-term effects. Voters in Turkey are more immediately concerned about the dire state of their economy and other domestic issues. Of foreign policy issues, cross border terrorism is the one that raises the most concern.<sup>28</sup>

The upcoming election consumes much energy among political elites, and it is unlikely that the parliament would be summoned to vote on the NATO accession issue any time soon. A vote would probably come after elections if they were to be held in June as scheduled. If the election date were to move to an earlier date, any vote on accession ahead of elections appears completely unrealistic.<sup>29</sup> As of now, there are clear signals that the election will be on May 14.

There are some indications that Stoltenberg is losing patience with Turkey. After the meeting in Ankara in early November he basically announced that it was time for Turkey to let Sweden and Finland into the alliance.

He argued that Sweden and Finland had met Ankara's concerns agreed upon in the June 2022 memorandum.<sup>30</sup> The NATO summit in July 2023 has been seen as a deadline, although I expect there is a growing realization within NATO that this could be difficult. If Hungary concludes the approval process in February 2023, the pressure on Turkey will increase.

Nevertheless, as Ibrahim Kalin, Erdoğan's chief adviser, has explained, the ratification process will take 2–2.5 months on the Turkish side.<sup>31</sup> Given that the parliament goes into recess some time before the election, it is not realistic to think that there will be sufficient time before the election – even if Turkey were to be content with the progress of the Swedes. If the presidential election in Turkey goes to a second round, the timeframe for completing the process ahead of the July summit becomes very tight. Should the opposition come into power, there might be more willingness to get this issue off the table. However, in that case a smooth process would also depend on the composition of the parliament. Accordingly, sometime between fall and Christmas is the most realistic scenario, provided the process between Sweden and Turkey can get back on track. However, some Istanbul-based analysts think that the issue might be resolved sooner, referring to the possibility of the parliament being summoned outside of the normal schedule to vote on the accession. These analysts also point to the significant pressure on Turkey to approve the Nordic bids and do not think that the Turkish leadership could suspend this much further. Still, no progress is expected before the elections. Should the opposition come to power, the NATO issue is likely to become a top priority. In case the incumbent government remains in power, the president is expected to drag his feet for a bit longer.<sup>32</sup>

At the time of writing, Turkey was hit by a catastrophic earthquake. An analysis of how this might affect the accession process is premature, but any consequences of the catastrophe for the presidential and parliamentary elections, affecting the campaign as well as the result, could play into the NATO process. Humanitarian aid from Sweden and Finland cannot move the process at this time and as such would not have any effect upon Turkish

decision-makers or public opinion.<sup>33</sup> Presently, a shift of focus away from the ongoing crisis towards Sweden and Finland's accession bids would be unacceptable to the Turkish public, and as such constitute an imprudent political move for any Turkish politician. Stoltenberg will visit Ankara in February: first and foremost, to talk about the earthquake and how NATO can provide support, but it is also expected that the accession bids will be discussed.

The delay poses a significant problem for a NATO which is preparing for accession. Brussels expends considerable energy on this within its preparations for the July 2023 summit in Vilnius. For example, the protracted process seriously affects the alliance's defense planning process ahead of the anticipated Nordic expansion.

According to Professor Serhat Güvenç, Turkey will approve the memberships of Sweden and Finland because the political costs of not doing so are too high.<sup>34</sup> However, in the process the Turkish leadership will try to further its national interests. This applies most importantly to NATO's policy on terrorism and directly concerning Turkey's disappointment with its allies over their failure to support the country against terrorist groups like the PKK and FETÖ. Therefore, moving forward, Ankara will use the trilateral memorandum and the accession issue to influence NATO (and individual member states) to increase support for Turkey's fight against PKK and YPG/PYD.

## SLUTTNOTER

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- 3 Spicer, J., Pamuk, H. & Emmott, R. (2022, May 18). How Turkey spoiled NATO's historic moment with Finland, Sweden. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/how-turkey-spoiled-natos-historic-moment-with-finland-sweden-2022-05-18/>
- 4 Reuters. (2022, June 12). Turkey's security concerns are legitimate, NATO chief Stoltenberg says. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-chief-stoltenberg-says-turkeys-security-concerns-are-legitimate-2022-06-12/>
- 5 US Department of State. (2022, May 15). Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability. [press release] <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-18/>
- 6 It should be noted that while the perspective of solidarity amongst allies is shared across the political spectrum, there are some disagreements on what constitutes a threat and/or terror organization. This is most evident regarding the YPG/PYD, on which the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and parties on the left hold more diverse views than the majority of Turkey's opposition parties and the government.
- 7 During both the Trump and Obama administrations the close link between PKK and YPG was stated in the CIA publication; "The World Factbook" <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/us-joins-turkey-pkk-fight-northern-syria> Also during the Obama Presidency, then Defense Secretary Ashton Carter confirmed "substantial ties" between the PYD/YPG and PKK. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GUdQJle-1s> So far, the Biden administration has not reported links between these groups in official documents.
- 8 Daily Sabah. (2016, June 1). Turkish military seizes US-Sweden made AT-4 anti-tank weapon from PKK terrorists. <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/06/01/turkish-military-seizes-us-sweden-made-at-4-anti-tank-weapon-from-pkk-terrorists> . As explained in the article, the weapon was most likely sent from the US to PYD to be used in the fight against ISIS but ended up in the hands of PKK.
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- 10 In Swedish; politisk vilde, ie. a resigned or ousted politician who retains their seat; an independent politician.
- 11 Stickings, T. (2022, June 7). Kurdish MP rescues Swedish government with swipe at Turkey. The National News. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2022/06/07/kurdish-mp-to-decide-fate-of-swedens-government-amid-nato-row/>
- 12 The document hit the headlines again in June 2022 after a vote of confidence in the Swedish parliament where the kingmaker independent MP Amineh Kakabaveh saved the government for a second time. She extracted a promise that the original document would not be watered down in the NATO accession process. Stickings, T. (2022, June 7). Kurdish MP rescues Swedish government with swipe at Turkey. The National News. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2022/06/07/kurdish-mp-to-decide-fate-of-swedens-government-amid-nato-row/>
- 13 Socialdemokraterna (2021, November 23). Socialdemokraterna fördjupar samarbete med självstyre. [press release] [https://www.socialdemokraterna.se/nyheter/nyheter/2021-11-24-socialdemokraterna-fordjupar-samarbete-med-sjalvstyre?TSPD\\_101\\_R0=08054bd396ab2000f43e9dee88851d300ddb6c6c8145bb0f872b688c2ce76e1ec250341436c3e0008bd6ea1bb1430002555afd02aa5c01db9b223d1fd771c5216cea09a6f27b403040fd5e70a1c82080c21c6029b35596f7b](https://www.socialdemokraterna.se/nyheter/nyheter/2021-11-24-socialdemokraterna-fordjupar-samarbete-med-sjalvstyre?TSPD_101_R0=08054bd396ab2000f43e9dee88851d300ddb6c6c8145bb0f872b688c2ce76e1ec250341436c3e0008bd6ea1bb1430002555afd02aa5c01db9b223d1fd771c5216cea09a6f27b403040fd5e70a1c82080c21c6029b35596f7b)
- 14 Golster, M. & Lindstrom, J. (2023, January 18). De ligger bakom Erdogandockan: "Vi vill inte gå med i Nato". SVT Nyheter. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/de-ligger-bakom-erdogandockan>
- 15 Rojavakommittéerna is according to the organization's webpage an organized group that supports (with information, finances, etc.) the revolutionary movement in Kurdistan. It also provides both informational and practical support to people who choose to go to Rojava as foreign fighters. See <https://www.rojavakommitteerna.com>
- 16 Frazer, S. & Olson, J. M. (2023, January 13). Sweden: Erdogan effigy 'act of sabotage' against NATO bid. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/nato-politics-sweden-government-turkey-stockholm-977373b0ba1d17f80b37d42d27779095>
- 17 Paludan is a known provocateur and has staged such rallies before, but in this case, he seems to have been highly motivated by the inner circle of the right-wing party, Sverigedemokraterna. In this case, a person working in the party's TV channel paid the event's processing fee to the Swedish police. Allegedly, Paludan was also asked by the same person to come to Sweden and burn the Quran outside the Turkish

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- 25 Daily Sabah. (2023, January 19). US envoy says F-16 deal with Türkiye not linked to Nordic NATO bid. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/us-envoy-says-f-16-deal-with-turkiye-not-linked-to-nordic-nato-bid>
- 26 Shaheen, J. et al. (2023, February, 2). Letter to President Joseph R. Biden. [https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/turkiye\\_f16s3.pdf](https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/turkiye_f16s3.pdf) It should also be noted that two of the US senators who have opposed the F-16 sales most firmly did not sign the letter, indicating that the congressional process would not be smooth even if Turkey lifts its veto against the Nordic countries.
- 27 Yacoubian, M. (2023). Ukraine's consequences are finally spreading to Syria. War on the Rocks. Commentary. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/01/ukraines-consequences-are-finally-spreading-to-syria/>
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- 32 Private conversations with academics and analysts in Turkey January and February 2023.
- 33 An overview on aid from Sweden can be found here: <https://www.government.se/press-releases/2023/02/additional-sek-30-million-in-humanitarian-support-and-experts-to-turkiye-and-syria/> and from Finland here: [https://um.fi/current-affairs/article/-/asset\\_publisher/iYk2EknllmNL/content/suomelta-hataapua-turkin-ja-syyrian-maanjaristysalueelle/35732](https://um.fi/current-affairs/article/-/asset_publisher/iYk2EknllmNL/content/suomelta-hataapua-turkin-ja-syyrian-maanjaristysalueelle/35732)
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