



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Turkey could start to resolve its complex foreign policy position after ratifying Sweden's NATO membership

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Sweden's accession to NATO has been delayed due to Turkey's increasingly complicated position regarding the Ukrainian and Middle Eastern crises.

A few months ago, it seemed as though Turkey would agree to Sweden joining NATO, but new crises have left it uncertain.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has been persistently pressuring Ankara to fulfil its promise from the NATO summit in Lithuania last July regarding ratifying the admission of Sweden in the parliament as the final member of the Alliance, but without success.

"Sweden has delivered on what they promised, and now we need the ratification of Swedish membership", said Mr Stoltenberg at a meeting of NATO Ministers of Defence last week.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan forwarded Sweden's application for NATO membership to the parliament in Ankara for ratification this summer, on the grounds that it met Turkey's demands regarding the treatment of the Kurdish community in Sweden.

But what appeared to be a formality still stands as an insurmountable obstacle to verifying Sweden's membership of the Alliance.

## There are no obstacles to the delivery of F16s

Turkey delayed Sweden's admission by imposing conditions on the US regarding the delivery of new F16 fighter jets. However, that arrangement has long been contentious for the US due to opposition from lawmakers in Washington.

This obstacle has been moving towards resolution in recent weeks. At the end of September, President Erdoğan repeated his promise that the parliament would ratify Sweden's candidacy if Joe Biden's administration delivered fighter jets.

The path for this decision was cleared by the departure of Senator Robert Menendez from the position of Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman following accusations of corruption. Senator Menendez was a principal obstacle to the arrangement for the delivery of 40 F16 aircraft to Turkey because, without the consent of his committee, this could not be implemented.

"Menendez being out of the picture is an advantage", said Turkish President Erdoğan recently.

However, the hint of a positive outcome for Sweden's NATO membership was short-lived because the terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel introduced a new and more complicated obstacle.

## New cooling of relations with Israel

Turkey is hesitant to fulfil its promise because, due to the conflict in the Middle East, it has been recalculating its positioning towards its allies in the Alliance and its interests in the Middle East.

President Erdoğan sided with the Palestinians and took a tough stance against Israel, demanding that it stop its actions he described as "bordering genocide".

This crisis stopped and even reversed the process of rapprochement between Turkey and Israel, which has been cautiously and slowly happening for the past 2 years. Less than a month ago, the leaders of the 2 countries, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Benjamin Netanyahu, met in New York during the UN General Assembly and discussed a range of topics that promised full normalisation.

However, the conflict between Israel and Hamas has brought Turkish-Israeli relations back to a low point with no prospect of immediate progress.

Ankara will stick to its solidarity with Palestine

until the end of the crisis with other Muslim countries, no matter the duration. But will they manage to balance such a policy with equally significant interests in the West, which expressed undivided solidarity with Israel?

## Ankara is becoming increasingly lonely

In this respect, Erdoğan's position will largely depend on the further actions of the US regarding the delivery of F16 aircraft. It is a long-standing, strategic demand of Turkey, and if it is fulfilled, it could trigger a change in Erdoğan's attitude, even in relation to the crisis in Israel.

Turkey and Israel, even though not particularly close to each other, had an intertwining of interests in supporting Azerbaijan in its operation to seize the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Azerbaijan was a significant meeting point for the interests of Turkey and Israel, and their joint success paved the way for a rapid thawing of mutual relations.

Also, the correction of Ankara's policy in relation to Israel is also possible because, after the operation against Hamas, Israel will openly support Ukraine and its defence against Russian aggression. Netanyahu's government has been restrained so far.

In this respect, Ankara must consider that it will remain the only one in the circle of Western allies with a balanced view of Russia. As a result, it would be more vulnerable to pressure from its NATO allies to take more decisive action against Russia.

## Less patience for Turkey's hesitation

Erdoğan's government has many pragmatic reasons to scale back its support for the Palestinians while continuing to move towards

normalising relations with Israel, which it had already started to do before October 7 and the terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas.

The benefits awaiting Turkey on the side of NATO go beyond the benefits of aligning itself with the Islamic bloc that supports Palestine. Hamas will not be a factor in post-conflict arrangements. This will force Turkey to distance itself from the organisation regardless of how the Israeli response to the Hamas attack ends.

Ankara was left without room for manoeuvre regarding Sweden's NATO membership because any further extension would be regarded as destabilising the Alliance at a time when it must demonstrate unity in support of Israel.

Combined with an already too-long reluctance to toughen up on Moscow, this would further increase doubts about Turkey's loyalty to NATO membership.

Therefore, a quick decision by the parliament in Ankara to ratify Sweden's NATO membership would be Turkey's first and least risky diplomatic step in untangling its complex foreign policy position.

Turkey has no obstacles for such a step, just as the US administration has no obstacles in implementing its decision to deliver F16 aircraft to Ankara.

This would dispel scepticism about Turkey's loyalty to the Alliance and strengthen unity within NATO, which is being tested by the crisis in Israel.