



The Armed Man on the Bosphorus: Turkey 2026

by Prof. Efrat Aviv

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,362, January 14, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In recent years, Turkey has emerged as a rising regional power. It has independent defense industries, produces armed and unarmed UAVs, missiles, warships, and advanced weapons systems, and maintains an extensive military presence from Syria to the Horn of Africa. The Turkish vision was articulated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in his annual New Year's address for 2026, in which he described Turkey's military buildup as a "major leap forward" encompassing all domains of defense. Erdoğan frames this process as a "historic opportunity" for Turkey to convert military achievements into lasting success. However, the very military power that was expected to strengthen Turkey's regional and international standing has, in recent years, isolated the country, entangled it both domestically and externally, and pushed it backward rather than forward.

For many years, Turkey was not perceived as an equal—or even comparable—actor in the international arena. Western politicians often spoke dismissively of Turkey as a "problematic" state that needed guidance rather than one capable of initiating policy. It was said that Turkey had no place in Europe as it was insufficiently democratic, and it was rarely treated as an autonomous power. The United States, for its part, viewed Turkey as a full partner but not necessarily a reliable one.

Relations with Turkey have been shaped primarily by its membership in NATO. Turkey's enduring advantage within the alliance is its geographical proximity to Russia, the Middle East, and the Balkans, which makes it a vital asset on NATO's southeastern flank. This position grants Ankara a certain freedom of maneuver to

pursue policies not always aligned with NATO's spirit—from the “soft authoritarianism” of four successful military coups between 1960 and 1997, through the state of emergency imposed after the failed coup attempt in 2016, to the occupation of northern Cyprus, which began in 1974 and continues to this day.

In recent years, Western dismissiveness toward Turkey has given way to amazement—and, at times, concern. Under the leadership of Erdoğan, who views Turkey as a power in its own right, Ankara has repeatedly tested the boundaries of its unique status within NATO and has often acted entirely independently of the alliance. Steps that would once have been considered unacceptable transgressions by a “secondary actor” are now met with caution, anger, and concern by the same actors who previously spoke of Turkey with condescension. This shift—from dismissal to apprehension—reflects Turkey's choice to become a power that can no longer be ignored.

Under Erdoğan over the past few decades, Turkey has elected to translate direct military power into political and strategic influence across nearly every available regional arena. In Syria, Ankara has not limited itself to indirect involvement: it effectively controls territories in the north of the country, deploys regular forces and proxies, closely monitors Israeli military activity in the Syrian theater, and has installed intelligence and air-defense assets as part of an effort to create strategic depth and constrain the freedom of action of other actors. In Libya, Turkey intervened directly in the fighting with troops, military advisers, and drones, ultimately playing a decisive role in saving the Tripoli government and shifting the balance of power. In the Caucasus, Ankara's overt military support for Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh war reinforced its standing as a regional security actor and directly affected the outcome of the campaign. In the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara has moved proactively to entrench its strategic interests in terms of maritime boundaries, energy, and sovereignty, deploying naval capabilities, conducting gas exploration, and maintaining a political-military presence intended to secure its role as a central actor in shaping the regional order. Erdoğan recently announced that Turkey ranks fourth globally in the size of its gas-drilling fleet. At the same time, Turkey has expanded its presence in the Horn of Africa through bases, agreements, and security deployments, and is seeking a new strategic foothold in Somalia, where the establishment of a Turkish naval and logistics base is under consideration. Taken together, these moves reflect a consistent policy. Turkey is not merely responding to the regional order; it seeks to actively shape it.

With regard to Israel, Turkey moved long ago beyond simple criticism. Only last week, the pro-government daily *Yeni Şafak* described Israel as Turkey's number-one threat. The question is when Israel itself will reciprocate the assessment. Turkey provides public support for Hamas – no longer framing that support as mere advocacy for the Palestinian cause but as an explicit backing of Hamas as an institution, with all that that implies. Turkey maintains a military presence in Syria, which has implications vis-à-vis both the Kurds and the Druze, and aspires to enter the security framework in Gaza. Ankara wants to be not simply a mediator but an involved and even leading party in Gaza, a status that would heighten the risk of military confrontation with Israel. This is but one of a web of arenas in which Turkey seeks to constrain Israel and influence outcomes. Turkey wishes to limit Israel's freedom of action from Syria through Gaza to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa (including Somaliland).

It may seem implausible to suggest that Turkish discourse revolves around the idea of an "Islamic army" arrayed against Israel, but pro-government journalists and commentators responded to Erdoğan's New Year 2026 message, "What if the Turkish army were to act in Jerusalem?", with statements that oscillated between wishful thinking and open threats.

It is precisely here that Turkey's strategic failure becomes evident. Instead of converting military power into diplomatic leverage, Turkey has turned it into a symbol of mistrust and religious confrontation. In this sense, Turkey's power has become its burden. The defense industries require massive investment at the expense of the civilian economy. Annual inflation in Turkey peaked at approximately 75.45% in 2024 and remained high in 2025 (notwithstanding a partial decline), with 2026 forecasts still in the double digits. Concurrently, the Central Bank of Turkey was forced to maintain an exceptionally high interest rate of around 38% in December 2025, raising the cost of credit, burdening economic activity, suppressing consumption and investment, and straining the labor market—a picture reinforced by the OECD, which had already identified an economic slowdown in 2024 due to tight financial conditions.

Against this backdrop, the Turkish government initiated an extraordinary move to generate earmarked revenues for defense industries. Media reports indicate that a bill was introduced to impose new levies and fees amounting to approximately \$2–2.3 billion annually, with a target of around 80 billion Turkish lira per year for the defense-industry support fund. This underscores that the security sector is

perceived as a heavy fiscal burden that requires additional resources. When combined with prolonged high inflation and interest rates, severe stabilization costs are suggested.

Together with these economic challenges, Turkey is grappling with deep social problems, including rising poverty, limited access to basic resources among segments of the population, and persistent regional inequality between the more developed western provinces and disadvantaged eastern regions. The status of women in particular reflects acute structural disparities. Female labor-force participation remains significantly lower than that of men; women's political representation is limited, with only about 19.9% of parliamentary seats held by women as of 2024; and high levels of gender-based violence and femicide persist, making women's rights a focal point of public protest and criticism of government policy.

Turkey has reinforced a nationalist discourse that suppresses criticism and depends on shows of force to sustain political legitimacy. The result is a state that appears strong externally but struggles to generate trust, partnerships, or long-term stability. Domestically, the combination of economic erosion, social tensions, and increased reliance on nationalism and military power places Erdoğan's rule under mounting structural strain. Turkish history shows that under conditions of extreme pressure, military intervention is not an anomaly but part of the political repertoire. Moreover, as in Iran, one cannot exclude the possibility that broad popular protest may emerge in Turkey – even if the actual mechanism of regime change, should it occur, will be driven by the elites rather than by the “street”.

With regard to Turkey's approach to its neighbors, the Israel-Greece-Cyprus axis is particularly illuminating. While the relationship among these states is not without difficulty or dispute, rather than threaten one another, they have used security cooperation, energy development, and civilian partnerships to expand their ties. Turkey, by contrast, has chosen to treat nearly every arena as a zero-sum contest. This logic applies to regional economic and energy projects as well as to relations with Israel. The irony is that Turkey could have positioned itself as a mediator rather than as a confrontational actor (even if not on the Israeli issue itself), but its choice of sustained confrontation, militarized rhetoric, and military intervention as an almost automatic solution has closed that window.

The Turkish paradox recalls the popular folk tale of Juha (Nasreddin Hoca). Juha is seen walking through the marketplace fully armed from head to toe, clad in

armor and carrying a sword – yet barefoot and hungry. When asked why he spent all his money on weapons when he had no bread, he replies proudly, “So they won’t steal the bread I don’t have.” In many ways, this is Turkey in 2026: it is constructing a formidable military edifice while its society and economy erode from within. Turkey’s power is not an asset but a burden. A state consumed by aggressive militarization at the expense of its own economy is not oriented toward peace. Turkey may not be completely isolated, but it is trapped in a cycle of confrontation and external tension. It may be heavily armed, but it is more vulnerable at home than ever.

Prof. Efrat Aviv is a senior researcher at the Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and an Associate Professor in the Department of History at Bar-Ilan University.