

Kurds Will Pay the Price for Sweden's NATO Deal

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After months of brinkmanship, NATO chiefs have announced that Sweden will be allowed to join the alliance. The deal rewards Turkish demands for Sweden's collaboration in its anti-Kurdish repression — and makes a mockery of NATO's purported stand for freedom.

Turkey will be dropping its opposition to Sweden joining NATO, the alliance's secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg announced last week. The news from NATO's summit in Vilnius was heralded by Joe Biden, the new right-wing coalition government in Stockholm, and hawkish liberal media alike. The champagne, Swedish prime minister Ulf Kristersson averred, [will start flowing soon enough, pending formal ratification](#). Yet not everyone will be celebrating.

As a NATO member, indeed one that commands the alliance's second-largest army, Turkey wields a veto over other countries joining the US-led bloc. Since early 2022, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has wielded this privilege to hold up both Sweden and Finland's accession. He has used this bargaining power to issue a laundry list of demands, primarily focused on making it easier for Turkey to continue its aggressive assaults on Kurdish rights, autonomy, and political organization — and even target the Kurdish diaspora in Europe.

Because of the Nordic countries' concessions to Turkey over the last year, Kurdish exiles in Sweden and Finland have faced harassment, closed bank accounts, arrests, and deportation. Swedish Kurdish representative Hakan Cifci warns that allowing Erdoğan to dictate terms amounts to a tacit endorsement of his government's "human rights violations, war crimes, cross-border operations, extrajudicial killings, the jailing of thousands of politicians, journalists, academics, activists, and the closure of hundreds of institutions and media networks."

The clash shows the limitations of a politics ready to indulge any authoritarianism just because it is nominally opposed to Moscow. Even aside from the right to free expression and self-determination, Kurdish representatives point out that the limited humanitarian and diplomatic support that the two Nordic countries previously offered to the Kurdish movement, on the basis of their once-neutral foreign policy, has quickly evaporated.

Illustrative is the case of Sweden's Social Democrats. Having long defended continued military neutrality, the party was rapidly dragged to the right on the NATO issue toward the end of its recent spell in government. Much-vaunted "friend of the Kurds" and former foreign minister Ann Linde even [compared a Kurdish flag to the ISIS standard](#), as the Social Democratic-led government sought to coddle Ankara.

In September's election, this party was any case outmaneuvered as a new conservative coalition took office, with the far-right Sweden Democrats as its largest single base of support in the Riksdag. Coupled with their strict anti-immigrant agenda, the Sweden Democrats' pivot toward NATO is likely, [Kurdish lawmakers warn](#), to precipitate the targeting of Kurdish asylum-seekers and their

deportation into the hands of Turkey's notorious security apparatus.

Crackdown

In Sweden as in its Finnish neighbor, which joined NATO in April after Turkey dropped an initial veto, the Kurdish community is already under pressure. Turkey has been demanding the extradition of scores of Kurdish exiles and members of the diaspora — including Amineh Kakabaveh, an Iranian Kurdish woman and former Swedish MP who has never set foot in Turkey.

"To the Turkish government, if you fight for Kurdish rights, you're a terrorist," she tells *Jacobin*. "I'm not a Turkish citizen — I only have Swedish citizenship, not even any papers from Iran. Iran wants to kill me, but Erdoğan is a killer too."

Kakabaveh herself is safe in Sweden, but there has been a sea change in the country's treatment of Kurdish political exiles. One political asylum seeker was deported in 2022, while Sweden has also been pursuing domestic convictions based on a controversial new anti-terror law implemented in answer to Turkey's demands. Sweden and Finland were long known for providing shelter to political refugees, but now there has been a surge in attempted deportations. They target such purported threats to European security as a [gay Kurd](#) who left Turkey at seventeen, converted to Catholicism, and married a Swedish man — but was also once pictured at a demonstration with a flag belonging to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) visible in the background.

The new terror law was recently used to issue a first conviction for "attempted terrorist financing" of the PKK, handed to a Kurdish man who brandished a gun outside a restaurant in an apparent attempt to extort money. According to Cifci, who represents the umbrella political organization Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) in Sweden, in the present climate any linking of Kurdish suspects to crime is sure to prompt assumptions of terrorist ties. "This creates fear among many Kurds here in Sweden and also among those who wanted to come to this country," says Cifci. "The Swedish secret service [SÄPO] has started to intimidate many people."

The de facto inclusion of the PKK on European terror lists has come under increasing criticism in recent years, given the organization does not stage attacks on European soil and is a signatory to the Geneva Convention. In a landmark case, Belgium's Court of Cassation found the PKK should be considered a legitimate party to a civil conflict with the Turkish authorities, potentially paving the way for the reopening of Turkish-Kurdish peace talks akin to those in place from 2013 to 2015. Previously, Sweden and Finland had themselves provided limited humanitarian and [diplomatic support](#) for the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), an unrecognized polity that subscribes to the same direct democratic, women-led, progressive political program as the PKK, while allowing the region's leading Democratic Unity Party (PYD) to open an office in Stockholm.

Yet under recent Turkish pressure, this policy of tolerance and promotion of dialogue is [rapidly crumbling](#). A group of Swedish MPs were castigated for posing with the PKK flag, while in Finland Kurdish demonstrations, Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations, and organizations have all faced unprecedented demands to remove flags from public display. Finland's Kurdish community "has never experienced this kind of repression before," according to a spokesperson for that country's Kurdish Democratic Society Centre. As Cifci notes, given that the militant Kurdish organization played a leading role in defeating ISIS and saving the Yezidi religious minority from genocide at their hands, there is a "paradox" in the way these countries have targeted the PKK flag as though it were equivalent to the black standard of ISIS.

Kakabaveh emphasizes that a steady rise in investigations, detentions, and deportation orders

targeting Kurds are not an aberration, but bring the country in line with a Europe-wide policy of criminalization of Kurdish political activity under Turkish pressure: “When the Kurdish people defeated ISIS, we became world heroes, creating security for Europeans to have a normal life. But when we fight for our rights, we’re terrorists.”

Meanwhile, Sweden has taken a particularly aggressive line in targeting [bank accounts](#) on the basis of new EU measures introduced in 2023 intended to prevent money laundering. People subscribing to Kurdish news sites and websites, donating to the Kurdish Red Crescent, or buying books from progressive publishers have been questioned by police, forcing the closure of bank accounts.

Middle East Offensive

Any concessions made to Turkey are also sure to have real effects in the Middle East. Turkey has been pursuing the green light for a fresh ground assault against the Kurds in North and East Syria as a quid pro quo for allowing Sweden into NATO, repeating devastating invasions in 2018-19 that resulted in hundreds of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. PYD cochair and leading Syrian Kurdish politician Salih Muslim tells *Jacobin* that while a ground invasion is currently unlikely due to continued US opposition, Turkey will probably continue or increase a [wave of deadly drone strikes](#) that have killed scores of civilians in 2023 alone, as well as destabilizing the region by striking humanitarian infrastructure, politicians, and commanders in the ongoing fight against ISIS.

“These kind of attacks happened before, with Turkey trying to release ISIS,” Muslim cautions. He here refers to the 2019 invasion that allowed [hundreds of ISIS affiliates to escape](#) as Turkish shells targeted security infrastructure and the Kurdish forces charged with guarding thousands of captive ISIS members. Other key Turkish demands for dropping the NATO veto — notably the transfer of F-16 fighter jets from the United States and the resumption of arms sales from Sweden and Finland following their suspension in response to Turkey’s globally condemned 2019 invasion — will only further Turkey’s never-ending war against the Kurds.

But Turkey’s cross-border military operations do not only imperil the Kurds and their ongoing anti-ISIS mission. Even on NATO’s own terms, Erdoğan’s use of his veto to extract concessions over the Kurdish question — an issue of no serious concern to any other NATO power — demonstrates his fundamental unreliability as a security partner. Erdoğan has long pursued a policy of brinkmanship, sending drones to Ukraine while simultaneously refusing to join European sanctions on Moscow, welcoming Russian oligarchs evading sanctions, and failing to adequately close the Bosphorus to Russian shipping. “The common military interest between Russia and Turkey is too big to be thrown away,” Muslim says. In Northern Syria, Libya, and elsewhere, the two powers have repeatedly engaged in aggressive “drone diplomacy” only to reach accords that allow them to maintain their respective spheres of influence.

Erdoğan’s willingness to hold up the accession process for months in response to a few flags being waved in Stockholm shows that his priorities align with his putative allies only when it suits him. “Erdoğan is not the prime minister of Sweden,” Cifti says. “NATO is manipulating the international community by stating that ‘Turkey has its own security concerns.’ However, what NATO fails to acknowledge is that Turkey is posing a security threat to Kurds and other peoples in the region.”

The battle over the Nordic countries’ accession illustrates the limitations of a security alliance that depends on the participation and consensus of authoritarian governments. For now, it’s the Kurds who will continue to bear the brunt of Erdoğan’s demands — but so long as he continues to direct NATO’s second-largest army, the Turkish president will also hold sway over the wider West. Even Sweden’s NATO accession is still not a done deal, with Erdoğan likely to push for further

concessions before his government ratifies the deal. The Kurdish movement is excluded from diplomacy and the halls of power at Turkey's behest, making it appear easy to continue appeasing Erdoğan. But the West may find its attack dog in Ankara willing to bite the hand that feeds.

Sweden's NATO alignment has been a de facto reality for many years, the more so since Sweden abandoned formal military neutrality in 1995 by joining European security alliances. But this is precisely why Kurdish representatives say there was no need for accession. "Sweden is absolutely protected by NATO, even if we're not officially in the alliance," Kakabaveh says. "We're more threatened by joining NATO, because our principles are totally eradicated." Both Kurdish representatives are calling for a referendum on NATO membership, giving Swedish citizens the chance to consider alternatives to formal accession.

Other alternatives were, indeed, once on the table. In the 1970s, under Social Democratic prime minister [Olof Palme](#), Sweden was known for supporting socialist, progressive self-determination struggles throughout the Third World. In this period, the country also maintained a relationship with the Yugoslav-led Non-Aligned Movement, uniting countries outside of NATO and the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact in pursuit of common goals in fields like debt, decolonization, and nuclear disarmament. For its part, the Kurdish movement continues to advocate for a "third way" beyond the Cold War power blocs.

A bolder foreign policy might have seen Sweden organize with other nations across the globe to advocate for nonalignment, dialogue, and de-escalation — while still maintaining a principled opposition to the Russian invasion. But Sweden's nominal "neutrality" has been eroded ever since the Cold War, European politics is ever more polarized between Russian aggression and hawkish NATO expansionism — and the stateless Kurds were always going to be first to be trampled upon.

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