



# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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## **Turkey's Nuclear Future**

Dr. Assa Ophir

Since its formal admission to the Western camp in 1952, Turkey has relied on the NATO nuclear umbrella. As part of NATO's nuclear deterrence, Turkey continues to host approximately 50 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on its territory at the İncirlik Air Base. Turkey also has an impressive record of observing its commitments to the legal regimes that govern nuclear nonproliferation. Ankara signed onto numerous international platforms such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (1969), the Zangger Committee and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (2000) as well as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (2001).<sup>1</sup>

Although traditionally Turkey has committed to the nuclear nonproliferation regime, a possible regional nuclear arms race that is most likely to be triggered by Iran in the near future may put an end to Ankara's self-restraint. However, as far as Erdoğan's increasingly ambitious Neo-Ottomanist leadership is concerned, it seems that Turkish domestic politics will be the core determinant shaping Turkey's nuclear policy.

### **Signs of a Nuclear Weapons Program**

Speaking at an economic forum in the city of Sivas on September 4, 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made headlines when he articulated Turkey's right to have nuclear weapons: "Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But I can't have missiles with nuclear heads. I cannot accept this."<sup>2</sup>

Erdoğan drew attention to the unfairness of the current international order and referred to the possession of nuclear weapons as a must for his country's international prestige. He claimed that all developed countries - including Israel - possess nuclear weapons and interestingly made an ambiguous statement by saying that Turkey is "currently working on it."<sup>3</sup> It was the first time he openly floated the idea of a Turkish nuclear option and hinted at Turkey's ambitions to pursue a military nuclear program. Some indications suggest Erdoğan was not bluffing.

Following the Fukushima calamity in Japan, which revived negative views regarding the usage of nuclear power, Turkey launched the construction of its first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu on the southern coast of Mersin province.<sup>4</sup> According to reports in the Turkish press, the Akkuyu plant will meet 10 percent of country's electricity needs.<sup>5</sup> Much of the Turkish population is eager to acquire nuclear know-how, and so they turned to Russia who agreed to provide the necessary technological infrastructure and scientific skills. The nuclear reactor will have four reactors, each with a capacity of 1,200 megawatts, and is being built by the Russian state nuclear energy agency Rosatom. The first unit is scheduled to start operations in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

As part of the Turkish-Russian agreement, students from Turkish universities have been enrolled in nuclear training programs in Russia to take jobs afterwards at the Akkuyu plant. According to some reports, Turkish engineering students have become the second largest national group studying nuclear sciences in Russia.<sup>7</sup> Turkish engineers who came back to Turkey told the Milliyet newspaper about their intensive studies in Russia which took a total of seven and a half years of training, including two years of Russian language preparatory classes.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from Russia, Turkey also initiated a rapprochement with nuclear-armed Pakistan. Turkey was Pakistan's fourth-largest source of arms, surpassing the United States, and Pakistan was Turkey's third-largest arms export market Between 2016 – 2019. While China remains Pakistan's main source of imported defense hardware, Turkey is increasingly providing Pakistan another important alternative to inaccessible Western arms.<sup>9</sup> It is possible to speculate that Turkey would be interested in receiving something in return from Pakistan, and that it might be a transfer of nuclear technologies for military purposes.

Other indications of the Turkish ambitions which have not been widely reported on

include the development of Ballistic missiles and Turkey's space program. In 2012, The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) announced the government's aim to develop a 2,500 km-range-missile.<sup>10</sup> Turkey also established the Turkish Space Agency in 2018, hoping to join the handful of other countries with space programs. Erdoğan himself unveiled the Turkish space program at an official ceremony on February 9, 2021. The program includes missions to the moon, sending Turkish astronauts into space, and developing internationally viable satellite systems.<sup>11</sup> Turkey is eager to develop national launch capabilities, which may ultimately be similar to Iran's "civilian" space program.<sup>12</sup>

### **Assessing Turkish Nuclear Attitudes**

Turkish political, religious and media elites' engagement with nuclear politics in Turkey over the years has received little attention, whereas President Erdoğan's declarations have received the bulk of the foreign and domestic media attention.

The Islamist perspectives on possession of nuclear weapons are based on an examination of the Quran and Sunnah, i.e., traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad. Turkey's right to develop nuclear capabilities is explained as a legitimate means of deterrence, as understood in the Islamic tradition. Hayrettin Karaman, Erdoğan's chief preacher, conveyed the idea in the pro-government daily *Yeni Şafak*: "In the time of our Prophet {Muhammad}, the most effective means of war were horse and arrow. For this reason, Muslims were encouraged to receive training in horse riding and shooting arrows. Today, the most effective weapon is the nuclear weapon.... countries that do not have nuclear weapons are suffering from lack of power and face great danger and threat,"<sup>13</sup>

Nedret Ersanel, another columnist at *Yeni Şafak*, called Turkey to develop nuclear weapons without losing any time. In his piece on January 6, 2021 Ersanel said: "As for the nuclear weapons issue. My personal opinion; we need it! The timing is right? Yes it is. Do not listen to those who say, 'Oh, what are you talking about?'"<sup>14</sup>

For the ultra-nationalists in Turkey, developing nuclear capabilities is instrumental to state security and the survival of the Turkish state. The father of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and iconic figure of the far right in Turkey, Alparslan Türkeş, has asserted already in 1975 that Turkey should acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> Other top

officials in the ultra-nationalist camp like former minister of state, Sadi Somuncuoğlu, or former transportation minister, Enis Öksüz, has also made similar calls in the past regarding the need to develop a nuclear military program.<sup>16</sup>

In the Kemalist-nationalist camp there is a general aversion towards the idea of a nuclear program and the government cooperation with Russia or other non-Western players on that matter. Despite frustrations with the EU and the USA in recent years, they still believe that Turkey's security interests are better served in NATO and the Western security establishment.

As the bastion of Kemalists today and Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), was against the Akkuyu project and Erdoğan's nuclear adventure from the very beginning. CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu made it very clear when he spoke at a meeting with the head of Ankara Chamber of Commerce on 10 June 2010:

*We do not want any of our neighbors, including, Israel and Iran, to have nuclear weapons in this region. If we want to institute peace in the Middle East, we pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons, not only in this region, but also in the world in general. That is because our basic philosophy is to make peace prevail. As CHP, we have been against nuclear weapons for a long time.*<sup>17</sup>

In addition to power politics, due to Akkuyu's location on the Ecemiş earthquake fault line, government critics voice serious concerns about environmental safety and financial concerns. Ahmet Akin, deputy chairman of the CHP, questioned the economic feasibility of the Akkuyu project during a party meeting on January 24, 2021. According to Akin, the fact that the project is fully owned by a Russian corporation (over 99%), the Akkuyu plant would essentially become a Russian base inside Turkey's borders.<sup>18</sup>

Meral Akşener, the leader of opposition nationalist İYİ party, cited Germany as example for a country that reducing its carbon emissions and expanding renewable energy use. According to Akşener, while Turkey is busy in inaugurating its first nuclear power plant, Germany is closing its nuclear power plants. "They say {Germans}, 'This technology is risky and outdated' and they are closing it," she noted. "However, our {government}, says that 'It is a new and amazing technology' and flaunt themselves."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly to other opposition parties and unsurprisingly, the Kurdish HDP is also against the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear reactor citing mainly safety and environmental concerns. In a September 17, 2018, public statement published on the official website of the party the HDP has warned that the nuclear reactor constitutes a threat not only to Mersin and its surrounding, but to Turkey and the entire region.<sup>20</sup> Some of the HDP officials, including parliament members, are actively participating in the demonstrations against the Akkuyu project. On 27 July 2021, a lawsuit has been filed against HDP members who joined anti-nuclear protest in Mersin.<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The prospects whether Turkey proliferates or not in the near future are very much interconnected with the domestic political dynamics inside the country. A continuation of Erdoğan's rule or having one of his heirs in power would likely to pave the way for a nuclear Turkey. President Erdoğan has already demonstrated that he is ready to pay political and economic prices for his strategic decisions. A return to a Kemalist "Old-Turkey" order, on the other hand, or at least some features of the *Ancien Régime* with its Western orientation, would probably make Turkey give up its quest for nuclear capabilities. A Kemalist-nationalist camp at the helm would restore Turkey's traditional foreign policy which acknowledges the West and the US as genuine allies. In such a scenario, it seems that Ankara would choose to abandon the nuclear option and go back to rely on NATO's nuclear umbrella.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Lessons from Turkey's Long Quest for Nuclear Power," in *The nuclear question in the Middle East*, CIRS, Summary Report No. 4, 2012, 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, "Erdoğan: Nükleer Füzemiz Olmamasını Kabul Etmeyorum," September 4, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/tr/erdo%C4%9Fan-n%C3%BCkleer-f%C3%BCzemiz-olmamas%C4%B1n%C4%B1-kabul-etmiyorum/a-50291882>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> According to reports in the Turkish media, the government plans to build another two nuclear power plants in addition to the Akkuyu facility, one with a Japanese and French consortium, and the other with a Chinese help. However, it is not clear when or even whether these joint projects will be materialize.

<sup>5</sup> *Milliyet*, "Son dakika: Dünyada bir ilk! Temeli atıldı: Türkiye için büyük önem taşıyor," March 10, 2021, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/galeri/son-dakika-dunyada-bir-ilk-temeli-atildi-turkiye-icin-buyuk-onem-tasiyor-6451947/17>.

<sup>6</sup> Ioannis N. Kessides, "The Future of the Nuclear Industry Reconsidered: Risks, Uncertainties, and Continued Potential," Policy Research Working Paper No. 6112, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2012, 206; Shaul Shay, "Turkey is going nuclear," *IPS Publications*, August 2018, 2 – 3. It should be noted that experts were not positive about the landscape of nuclear industry even before the Fukushima incident, for example, see Glenn R. George, "Financing New Nuclear Capacity: Will the 'Nuclear Renaissance' be a Self-Sustaining Reaction?," *The Electricity Journal* 20, no. 3 (2007): 12–20; William J. Nuttall and Simon Taylor, "Financing the nuclear renaissance," *European Review of Energy Markets* 3, no. 2 (2009): 187-202.

<sup>7</sup> John Spacapan, "Conventional wisdom says Turkey won't go nuclear. That might be wrong," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 7, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/07/conventional-wisdom-says-turkey-wont-go-nuclear-that-might-be-wrong/>.

<sup>8</sup> Mithat Yurdakul, "'A'dan Z'ye Nükleer Santral Yapacağız'," *Milliyet*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/ekonomi/adan-zye-nukleer-santral-yapacagiz-6479316>.

<sup>9</sup> Arif Rafiq, "The Turkey-Pakistan entente: Muslim middle powers align in Eurasia," *Middle East Institute*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-pakistan-entente-muslim-middle-powers-align-eurasia>.

<sup>10</sup> *Hürriyet*, "TÜBİTAK: Hedefimiz 2 bin 500 Kilometre Menzilli Füze Yapmak", January 14, 2012.

Giving a 2,500 km range target by the government was indeed to set the bar high considering that the longest range the Turkish industry can currently achieve is the 280 km range 'Bora' missile, which saw its operational debut back in May 2019, see Can Kasapoğlu, "Turkey's Nuclear Onset: Military Policy, Techno-Nationalism Trends and Defence Industrial Capabilities," *SWP*, No. 38 October 2019, 2-3, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/turkeys-nuclear-onset>.

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<sup>11</sup> Suzan Frazer, "Turkey unveils space program including 2023 moon mission," AP News, February 9, 2021,

<https://apnews.com/article/turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-moon-spacex-europe-a763414e402eb70e78ae2c2a89134f33>.

<sup>12</sup> Uzi Rubin, "Iran's Space Program," *JISS*, September 10, 2020, <https://jiss.org.il/en/rubin-irans-space-program-2/>.

<sup>13</sup> Hayrettin Karaman, "Nükleer Silah Yasağı," *Yeni Şafak*, October 30, 2009, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hayrettin-karaman/nukleer-silah-yasagi-19286>.

For other examples of Islamist view on nuclear weapons see, *Sorularla İslamiyet*, "Bir devletin, savunma amaçlı olarak, nükleer silah edinmesi caiz midir?" May 20, 2015, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/bir-devletin-savunma-amacli-olarak-nukleer-silah-edinmesi-caiz-midir>; Sadullah Aydın, "Nükleer teknoloji Müslümanların da hakkı," *Doğruhaber*, April 18, 2021, <https://dogruhaber.com.tr/yazar/sadullah-aydin/16457-nukleer-teknoloji-muslumanlarin-da-hakki/>; *Milli Gazete*, "Düşmana Karşı, en Mükemmel Kuvveti ve Silahı Hazırlamak Gerek," September 8, 2006, <https://www.milligazete.com.tr/haber/1012685/dusmana-karsi-en-mukemmel-kuvveti-ve-silahi-hazirlamak-gerek>.

<sup>14</sup> Nedret Ersanel, "Daha S400'ü Hazmedemediler, bir de Nükleer Silah Yaparsanız...", *Yeni Şafak*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/nedret-ersanel/daha-s400u-hazmedemediler-bir-de-nukleer-silah-yaparsaniz-2057274>.

<sup>15</sup> Oğuzhan Cengiz, *Alparslan Türkeş ve Dokuz Işık* (İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz Yayınları, 2014), 518.

<sup>16</sup> *Hürriyet*, "MHP, Atom Bombası İstiyor," March 12, 2000, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/mhp-atom-bombasi-istiyor-39139480>; Kibaroğlu, "Nuclearization of the Middle East," 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Habertürk*, "Aygün'den, Kılıçdaroğlu'na Ziyaret," June 10, 2010, <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/522399-aygunden-kilicdarogluna-ziyaret>.

<sup>18</sup> "CHP Genel Başkan Yardımcısı Akın'dan Akkuyu Nükleer Santrali Bilgi Notu," *CHP parliamentary group meeting*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-genel-baskan-yardimcisi-akindan-akkuyu-nukleer-santrali-bilgi-notu>.

<sup>19</sup> "O kirli çarkı haramzadelerin başında kıracağız," *İyi Party parliamentary group meeting*, June 23, 2021, <https://iyiparti.org.tr/o-kirli-carki-haramzadelerin-basinda-kiracagiz>.

<sup>20</sup> "Nükleer felaketin kapısını açıyorsunuz! Nükleer Santral İstemiyoruz!" *HDP Official Website*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.hdp.org.tr/tr/nukleer-felaketin-kapisini-aciyorsunuz-nukleer-santral-istemiyoruz/12374/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Bianet*, "Nükleer santral karşıtı açıklamaya dava açıldı," July 27, 2021, <https://bianet.org/bianet/saglik/247760-nukleer-santral-karsiti-aciklamaya-dava-acildi>.