



Turkey Aims to Play Stabilizing Role in Afghanistan after NATO Withdrawal

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Key Takeaway: Turkey is evaluating the changing security environment and the emerging Taliban government to strike a minimal-risk balance between Ankara's ambitions and constraints. Turkey evacuated its troops from Afghanistan on August 27 after months-long negotiations with US and Taliban representatives to retain a security role in the country after NATO's departure. However, Turkish officials are still signaling their intent to adopt a political and security role in Afghanistan and to become the Taliban's primary interlocutor with the West. The Turkish government will likely remain committed to playing a stabilizing role in Afghanistan—primarily through non-military channels—to promote its international standing as an influential regional power.

The Turkish Armed Forces left Afghanistan, but Ankara is poised to play key security and diplomatic roles in the country. Turkish officials announced the evacuation of the Turkish military contingency from the Kabul Airport on August 25, 2021, despite separate discussions with the United States and the Taliban for Turkey to continue running the Kabul International Airport.¹ Top Turkish officials had argued that the Turkish forces could continue to manage the security and operations of the airport as they had since 2015 if the Taliban so desired.² Ankara also pivoted to establishing relations with the Taliban through the Turkish Embassy in Qatar at least as early as August 15, when the Taliban reached Kabul, in a likely bid to maintain and expand the Turkish role in Afghanistan.³ The bulk of Turkish forces left Afghanistan by August 27 under reported Taliban pressure, but the Turkish Embassy is continuing its operations as of September 3.⁴ Recent statements by both the Taliban and Ankara indicate that Turkey is exploring ways to help run the Kabul Airport and support the new Taliban government.⁵

Ankara and the Taliban both believe Turkey can play a role in shaping the new Afghanistan. Ankara will likely double down on its political and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan to prove its ability to stabilize and shape conflicts as a regional power. Turkey has provided training for Afghan security forces, political outreach to various Turkic communities, aid and private sector investment, and non-combatant military services. Turkey refrained from participating in military campaigns against the Taliban and instead took on logistical and security duties like Kabul Airport security, intelligence sharing, and funding and training at Afghan military schools.⁶ Turkish officials leveraged this non-combatant history when they offered the Taliban further “technical and security assistance” in August.⁷ Taliban spokesperson Mohammad Naeem said that the Taliban wants Turkey's support in areas ranging from reconstruction and economy to healthcare and education on August 25.⁸ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan views such a Turkish role as a natural one, underlining Turkey's long-standing ties to its fellow Muslim country with a significant Turkic population.

Ankara and the Taliban are also in talks about the future of Kabul Airport. President Erdogan stated that the Taliban asked Turkey to run the operations of Kabul International Airport if the Taliban provided its security instead of Turkish forces. However, anonymous Turkish officials claimed that Turkey would only run the airport in partnership with Qatar and only if security was provided by a private security firm of former

Turkish soldiers.⁹ SADAT International Defense Consultancy, known for credible reports of its supervision and payment of Turkish-backed Syrian fighters in Libya and Azerbaijan, is the only private Turkish security company that could adopt such a duty.¹⁰ Discussions are ongoing as of September 3 and the Taliban's position remains unclear.

Turkey's Ambitions and Constraints

Afghanistan is a theater of opportunity, but not an existential security problem for Ankara.

Afghanistan poses little direct threat to Turkish national security, in contrast to the perceived terrorism and internal stability threats the country is fighting in northern Iraq and Syria. Afghanistan's current situation presents an opportunity for Ankara to maximize its political and security reach by filling growing gaps in foreign investment, projects, and support and by advancing NATO interests. Turkey can advance its mutual interests with NATO in Afghanistan while pursuing its own objectives as an aspiring power in the region. A successful bid in helping stabilize Afghanistan could elevate Turkey as a necessary and capable security player in the region and to its allies—two longstanding goals of the Erdogan government. During an August 25, 2021, speech to celebrate the anniversary of a historic Turkic battle, Erdogan said “We transformed from a country of existential battles inside its own borders to one that has a say in every critical matter in the world.”¹¹ This self-perception of Turkey as a regional powerbroker helps drive President Erdogan and Ankara's top leadership's pursuit of more activist policies beyond Turkey's immediate neighborhood—including in Afghanistan.

Turkey will likely perceive one or multiple of the following objectives in the near term as advantageous to its regional and global standing:

- **Deliver legitimacy to a new Afghan government:** As a Muslim NATO country, Turkey could be a useful partner for the Taliban leadership to gain international acceptance and legitimacy as well as access to global financial systems.
- **Advance the Turkish security role in line with, and beyond, NATO goals:** Turkey has been offering military training and security cooperation deals to an increasing number of developing countries. Turkish forces have hosted Afghan, Somali, Azerbaijani, Pakistani, Libyan, and other security forces for capacity-building trainings as part of, or beyond, NATO missions. Turkey will likely continue its trainings with Afghanistan and offer new technical and military cooperation opportunities to the Taliban government.
- **Insert Erdogan-friendly Turkish companies to Afghanistan for profit:** Turkish companies with strong ties to the Erdogan government have won significant reconstruction contracts in Libya, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and elsewhere. Turkey will likely look for similar construction and investment opportunities in Afghanistan for profit and to benefit the crony network Erdogan cultivates for government-friendly companies.
- **Improve Turkey's position within NATO:** Turkey is one of the few, if not the only, NATO countries that will maintain a diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. It has also been in frequent contact with many NATO allies to discuss developments in Afghanistan and demand financial support.¹² Ankara will seek to use its unique position in and access to Afghanistan to improve relations with NATO allies, particularly the United States, and gain concessions.
- **Position Turkey as a regional power for security and stabilization:** President Erdogan suggested that Turkey, Turkic Central Asian countries, and Pakistan could work with the Taliban if they take “positive steps” during a speech on August 29.¹³ Erdogan has not specified what those steps include or how Turkey might support them, but Turkey could leverage its ties to Central Asian countries to promote regional security initiatives.

Meanwhile, Ankara also faces the risks of deteriorating public opinion, increased refugee flows, and growing financial costs

- **Public opinion:** The Turkish public is more casualty, cost, and risk-averse for Turkish involvement in conflicts it views as “optional”—such as Libya or Afghanistan—raising the political cost of a potential long-

term Turkish involvement. Ankara is also attempting to lessen public opposition to the government's cooperation with the Taliban by using the pro-government Turkish media to present a moderate image of the Taliban.¹⁴

- **Refugee flows into Turkey:** Ankara receives significant public criticism for hosting more than 4 million Syrian refugees in addition to the Afghans who fled Afghanistan in recent months.¹⁵ Turkish officials will seek to minimize Turkey's refugee intake similar to Pakistan and other countries bordering Afghanistan. Turkey may attempt to pressure the Taliban leadership to refrain from radical or abusive policies that might destabilize Afghanistan or cause Afghans to flee the country in large numbers.
- **Financial costs:** Turkish officials likely understand the financial costs of an extended military-political presence from the extensive Turkish role in Syria. Ankara will likely seek to avoid high-cost responsibilities and aim to subsidize those responsibilities it does take on by pursuing private contracts and external financial resources from NATO allies.

Trends to Watch

Turkish outreach to non-Taliban stakeholders: A Turkish outreach effort to the Taliban opposition in the Panjshir Valley or other exiled leaders would indicate a change in the Turkish calculus. Turkey has spent years cultivating relations with Turkic communities in Afghanistan and former Northern Alliance leaders with close ties to Turkey.¹⁶ Non-Taliban Afghan political actors may also reach out to Turkey to court Turkish support for their own political objectives. Turkey does plan to continue “close dialogue with all parties” in Afghanistan, but it may damage some of those relationships if it cooperates with the Taliban government in the institutional ways it is considering.¹⁷ Turkey will likely wait for the Taliban government to take shape before making additional commitments to the Taliban.

Turkey's relations with non-NATO countries: Turkey coordinates with Pakistan and Qatar, in addition to NATO members, on developments in Afghanistan. However, its outreach to Russia and China has been limited. If Turkey plans to maintain a role in Afghanistan, it will likely need to interact with or at least deconflict with other key states that can recognize the Taliban government—namely Iran, Russia, and China.

Turkey's perception as an interlocutor between NATO and Afghanistan: Turkey's current objectives for a stabilized Afghanistan align with those of the United States and the NATO alliance. Turkey's goals go beyond those of NATO, but this alignment could nonetheless create opportunities for the United States and NATO to maintain limited international access and to ensure communication and limited accountability from Kabul in exchange for the support the Taliban says it needs from Turkey.

¹ [Turkish MoD Twitter](#)

² <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-afganistanin-istikrari-icin-her-cabayi-gosterecegiz-602142.html>

<https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-afgan-halkinin-huzuru-icinisbirligine-haziriz,i0PbIXrTfU2ioR10cmK4Nw>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-talks-with-all-afghan-parties-welcomes-talibans-messages-minister-2021-08-17/>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/29/erdogan-turkey-diplomatic-embassy-kabul-afghanistan?sf150307620=1>

<https://twitter.com/ahmetgormez/status/1432410123717185543?s=20>

⁵ [TRT Haber, Reuters](#)

⁶ https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2016C28_sey_srt.pdf

⁷ [Reuters](#)

⁸ <https://twitter.com/anadoluagency/status/1430521697162170372>

⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-turkey-taliban-close-deal-kabul-airport>

¹⁰ <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/rise-paramilitary-groups-turkey>

<https://undocs.org/S/2021/229>

¹¹ <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/130137/-bolgesinde-ve-dunyada-her-kritik-meselede-soz-sahibi-bir-ulkeye-donustuk->

¹² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-10/turkey-wants-financial-military-support-to-secure-kabul-airport>

<https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-57898378>

¹³ <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-talibanin-devlet-yonetme-noktasindaki-durusunu-gorecegiz-604939.html>

¹⁴ Haberturk interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WphW04KtX9g>

A Haber Interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOLXfZGTHLs>

¹⁵ <https://www.voanews.com/europe/turkish-officials-say-deportation-centers-packed-afghan-refugees>

¹⁶ <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/chpden-afganistan-tepkisi-erdogan-kabul-etse-de-biz-asla-izin-vermeyiz-1863479>

¹⁷ <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-sureci-talibanin-sozleri-degil-icraatlari-belirleyecek-604271.html>