

Turkey displays a new level of religious nationalism in Syria campaign

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has likened Turkey's army to Ottoman troops in WWI, calling them martyrs fighting for their religion.

by [Scott Peterson](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue



Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visits the Çanakkale Martyrs' Memorial commemorating Turkish soldiers who fought in World War I. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Randam](#).

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) When Turkey's armed forces seized control of the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northern Syria in March after a two-month campaign, it was presented as a victory by "Islam's last army" in a holy war.

Over the years Turkey—the second-largest army in the NATO alliance, with a fiercely secular tradition—has mounted frequent cross-border operations into Iraq. "Operation Olive Branch," as Turkey named the Afrin offensive, is the second major operation in Syria since 2016. Turkey has said its target is militants with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, known by the abbreviation PKK, and Syrian Kurds affiliated with it.

What is new is for Turkey to wrap its military operations in overtly religious language.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development Party, known as AKP, have been rebranding Turkish nationalism. The results, analysts say, allow less room for political opposition and deepen the anti-Western sentiment that portrays Turkey as the front line in a clash of civilizations.

Aslı Aydintaşbaş, a Turkey expert on the European Council on Foreign Relations who is based in Istanbul, said the current combination of an interpretation of Islam with Turkish nationalism “has not existed before.”

“The moment you define it as a religious war, you have no sympathy for the people on the other side,” she said. “They’re the enemy. They are terrorists. They are not innocent.”

People have been detained or investigated for criticizing the war or making other comments on social media. Two weeks into the offensive, the Interior Ministry announced that 449 people had been arrested and accused of “propaganda and terrorism.”

“Once you call something a holy war, citizens are very constrained in their ability to say anything about it,” Aydintaşbaş said.

The blending of nationalism and religiosity, which has been a growing feature of AKP rule since it came to power in 2002, surged in the aftermath of a failed July 2016 coup attempt. Nightly “unity” rallies, organized in cities across the country by the AKP for a month, were steeped in mixed religious and political imagery.

Mustafa Akyol, the Turkish author of *The Islamic Jesus* and *Islam without Extremes*, said Erdoğan is using a religiously infused nationalist narrative to support his status as a strong leader. While “the dominant and official ideology in Turkey has always been nationalism,” he said, the religious component has become more visible.

“The narrative of President Erdoğan in the past five or six years has been defined by these grave threats to Turkey,” said Akyol, who is also a fellow at the Freedom Project at Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

Turkey is portrayed as “threatened by endless conspiratorial powers, the Western allies, the PKK movement,” Akyol said, “and against such grave enemies, we need a

strong leader, a strong national psyche . . . with a lot of holy references.”

Defining Turkey “through its Islamic heritage and the Ottoman Empire” helped mobilize support for the Afrin operation, he said.

Erdoğan vowed in late March that Turkey would use its soldiers and the Syrian militia it supports to seize control over all the border territory, most of it now in the hands of U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds. Much of that ground is now held by Kurdish militias, whom Turkey considers to be terrorists, that were backed by the United States to fight the self-described Islamic State, with American units seeded among them.

In Afrin, Turkey’s Syrian proxy force was photographed engaging in looting as well as destroying a statue of a mythical figure in Kurdish history who represented resistance and freedom.

From the start, the Afrin operation has been cast in Islamic terms.

“There will be no progress unless there is jihad,” parliament speaker Ismail Kahraman said as the offensive began. “The great state will stand up, we have martyrs, may Allah grant them mercy.”

Funerals for fallen Turkish soldiers have also been saturated with religious terminology. Speaking at one in March, Erdoğan said, “Paradise is near” and that “our martyrs have undertaken a great struggle . . . for our religion.”

Erdoğan has also compared the spirit of Turkish soldiers at Afrin to those Ottoman troops whose legendary faith helped them prevail in the World War I Battle of Çanakkale on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915.

Marking that anniversary, Erdoğan quoted lines from the poet Yahya Kemal, which spoke of the Turkish army then as “the army which has died for you; you raise them high in the call to prayer; victory is claimed, because this is the last army of Islam.”

Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs issued a sermon in mid-February regarding the Afrin offensive, saying, “It is the highest level of jihad to enter armed struggle for the faith, existence, the homeland, and freedom.”

Another element of the rhetoric is anti-Western sentiment, which characterizes Turkey’s role as a front line in a broader civilizational clash, Aydıntaşbaş said.

“‘Islam’s last army’ isn’t just fighting Kurds, it’s fighting Kurds who are being used by the West and Christian world, in the old set-up that they are describing,” she said.

At the same time, she noted Turkey’s role in NATO and its bid for membership in the European Union.

“Turkish leaders want it both ways,” she said. “They want to cooperate with the West but have the right to do West-bashing, Euro-bashing, and U.S.-bashing in the public sphere.”

A version of this article, which was edited on April 6, appears in the print edition under the title “Once secular, Turkey’s leaders invoke Islam.”