

On Ankara's “nuclear case”

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Annotation

ARVAK analyzes Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's controversial statement about the country's potential entry into the nuclear arms race. This analysis scrutinizes the development of Turkey's nuclear science and technology infrastructure, utilizing open-source data and reports from specialized institutions (IISS, Carnegie). Emphasis is placed on examining clandestine collaboration with Pakistan, the acquisition of dual-use technology, and the utilization of civilian nuclear energy facilities (Akkuyu and Sinop) as platforms for training nuclear personnel. Furthermore, the paper investigates Ankara's foreign policy calculus, which seeks to employ leverage against NATO allies and regional adversaries in response to the potential nuclearization of Tehran.

Keywords: Turkey, Hakan Fidan, nuclear weapons, NPT, Akkuyu NPP, Pakistan, Abdul Qadeer Khan, Middle East, regional security, dual-use technologies.

1. Verbal triggers and discourse shift

On February 9, 2026, in an interview with *CNN Türk*, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that his country would be forced to join the nuclear race “*in the event of the appearance of such weapons in other countries of the region*”. According to him, Turkey does not wish to observe “*abrupt changes*” in the region capable of disrupting the current balance of power. According to the head of the Turkish MFA, countries having unresolved issues with Iran will begin to strive for the possession of nuclear weapons, which will require Ankara to join this race. Virtually all international media outlets that commented on H. Fidan's statement specifically noted the circumstance that, when asked a clarifying and direct question by a journalist about Turkey's desire to possess atomic weapons, the minister reacted with “*silence accompanied by a meaningful smile*”.

2. Genesis of Turkey's nuclear infrastructure

According to analytical centers, such as the *British International Institute for Strategic Studies* and the *Carnegie Endowment*, Turkey, beginning in the 1950s, consistently formed its own scientific and educational base for the mastery of nuclear technologies. The stated goal in doing so was their subsequent application in the fields of energy and healthcare. Prior to the coming to power of the “Justice and Development Party” (AKP), Ankara did not provide the international community with serious grounds for suspicion of evading obligations under the “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons” (NPT) signed by it in 1969, or of conducting work testifying to intentions to acquire its own nuclear weapons. Turkey has expressed complete contentment with its incorporation into the global NATO security framework, which primarily entails a “*nuclear umbrella*” for the nation provided by its North Atlantic Alliance partners. Since the “Cold War” era, a portion of the NATO bloc's tactical nuclear arsenal (estimated by various sources to currently include 50-100 warheads) has been stationed on Turkish soil. Although Ankara lacks direct control over these weapons, it views their presence as a guarantee of its sovereignty and a reliable measure of protection.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 26.02.2026.

However, with the coming to power of the “Justice and Development Party” (AKP) in Turkey in 2002 and the subsequent process of weakening the positions of the Kemalists, traditionally oriented toward maintaining the established balance in relations with NATO, Ankara began to conduct a more independent regional and international policy, which also found reflection in the sphere of the country’s nuclear developments. Turkey intensified work on building scientific-research potential and training academic personnel in the field of nuclear physics. According to estimates by analysts at the Carnegie Endowment, Turkey has recently executed large-scale work within the framework of its program for the development of the peaceful atom, which sufficiently indicates that, in theoretical terms, the country has approached the capability of independently creating nuclear weapons.

3. Technological basis and co-operation with external players

The presence of 4 nuclear research centers – in Çekmece, Sarayköy, Ankara (*ANAEM*), and Istanbul (*TRIGA*) – allows for the assumption that Turkish specialists are actively mastering this field. This situation potentially aids in the acquisition of the requisite theoretical and practical expertise necessary for subsequent endeavors in the domain of nuclear weapons development. Concurrently, Turkey maintains close collaboration with the Russian Federation, having authorized it to construct the first Turkish Nuclear Power Plant (“Akkuyu”) and simultaneously mandating the training of Turkish specialists at prominent Russian scientific and educational institutions specializing in nuclear physics. Toward similar objectives, Ankara is presently engaged in negotiations with Seoul, seeking, in exchange for a tender to build an additional nuclear power plant in Turkey, to gain access to South Korean nuclear technologies and personnel training facilities.

Ankara’s large-scale and diversified initiatives suggest that at a certain stage, Turkey will be capable of converting its accumulated potential into the development of combat nuclear technologies. Furthermore, experts from the *British International Institute for Strategic Studies* do not discount the possibility that Turkey already possesses a significant number of centrifuges for the separation of uranium isotopes, having advanced the process to the necessary “*combat readiness*”.

A number of other indirect facts also testify to the seriousness of Ankara’s intentions to expand its own base of nuclear developments. According to data from the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Turkey, the country has confirmed reserves of *uranium* ore in an amount of no less than 9,000 tons. In addition, Turkey possesses significant reserves of *thorium* ore, estimated at approximately 380,000 tons. Until 2018, the exclusive right to develop these deposits belonged to the American company *Westwater Resources* and structures affiliated with it. In the summer of 2018, Turkish authorities suddenly revoked the license from the American side, restoring full control over the reserves. However, while these steps by Ankara might be rationalized by a desire to establish an indigenous raw material base for the continued development of national nuclear energy, justifying its unveiled clandestine cooperation with Islamabad and Pakistani nuclear scientists solely by the “*peaceful atom*” agenda proves exceedingly challenging.

4. The Pakistan trace and dual-use procurement

The crux of the issue resides in the fact that Turkey served as a protracted sanctuary for Abdul Qadeer Khan, the “*father of the Pakistani nuclear bomb*”, whom the United States and

Great Britain suspected of illicitly transferring nuclear technologies to North Korea, Iran, and Libya. Intelligence from Western services indicates that Turkey facilitated Abdul Qadeer Khan's communication with the relevant agencies of the aforementioned countries and, it is presumed, offered its territory for the organization of documentation transfer and even the transport of specific components for the establishment of production-technological chains.

This evidence casts significant doubt on the hypothesis that Ankara's involvement in such clandestine operations was solely as a mediator, without being a direct beneficiary. This skepticism is further supported by intelligence from German and Indian experts. They have documented recurring attempts, observed over the last five years, to transport various components from or through Pakistan to Turkey, disguised as goods for civilian manufacturing facilities, which may, in fact, be linked to the atomic industry, specifically its military dimension. For instance, instances include the seizure in Indian ports of vessels transporting to Turkey metal casings and other rocket components declared as water purification equipment. Furthermore, ships were intercepted carrying autoclaves, labelled as industrial dryers, which are actually utilized in the production of *silicon dioxide*, a known additive in the manufacture of nuclear fuel.

5. The political-legal dilemma of the NPT

Estimates from numerous analysts suggest that the presented data attest to Turkey possessing, at a minimum, all the capabilities necessary to initiate the technological chain for creating nuclear weapons, and, at a maximum, to the actual engagement in applied research in this field. The only factor constraining Ankara's actions is the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" (NPT). Compliance with the NPT is guaranteed by the recognized nuclear powers, which include both Turkey's geopolitical rivals and its NATO allies. Theoretically, the acquisition by Turkey of its own conventional weapon of mass destruction is disadvantageous to all these poles. Consequently, a formal withdrawal by Ankara from the NPT would not be sufficient to ensure its exemption from accountability.

Some analysts posit that Ankara considered the possibility of modifying its obligations pertaining to nuclear non-proliferation. This situation is largely attributable to the radical actions of the Donald Trump administration, specifically its withdrawal from or violation of several international agreements, which significantly eroded the credibility of international law and exposed the fragility of the global system of checks and balances. However, observers note that Turkey does not possess the same degree of political and institutional autonomy enjoyed by the United States. Should Ankara attempt to disregard the provisions of the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" or initiate its withdrawal, driven by what it perceives as existential national imperatives, the repercussions would be fundamentally more severe, carrying substantial international risks.

According to the assessments of a number of analysts, President R. T. Erdogan's prior statements concerning the perceived injustice of Turkey's lack of nuclear power status constituted a form of "*trial balloon*", intended to gauge the international reaction to Ankara's nuclear aspirations. The Turkish leader articulated this position in 2019 during an economic forum in Sivas. At that time, evaluations from the U.S., the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation (RF), and the European Union (EU) generally concluded that President Erdogan's remarks were primarily driven by emotional considerations and should

not be interpreted as an official, ambitious overture. The Turkish president was implicitly informed that his statement was not viewed within the context of a genuine military-political initiative, and consequently, he should not anticipate support from the community of nuclear powers for the practical realization of Turkey acquiring nuclear status.

Consequently, R. Erdogan's ambitious pronouncements concerning "*nuclear injustice*" garnered negligible attention from political figures in the public sphere. Conversely, within the expert community, these statements were primarily interpreted as radical rhetoric, deemed necessary for the Turkish leader to advance dual objectives: engaging in regional rivalry with Israel and Iran for leadership in the Middle East, and solidifying the AKP's position within the domestic political configuration. However, the current involvement of Hakan Fidan in Erdogan's discourse concerning nuclear status significantly alters this dynamic. As observers note, populism as a method of political engagement is uncharacteristic of the pragmatic figure of Fidan; therefore, his rhetoric, particularly on sensitive issues for Turkey such as the nuclear agenda, necessitates exceptional scrutiny.

H. Fidan's aforementioned statement is not a precedent. It was preceded by an interview in January 2025 on the air of the *A Haber* TV channel, during which the Turkish Foreign Minister voiced criticism of the NPT. According to his assessment, this treaty suffers from "*structural injustice*", since it maintains strategic superiority for the five nuclear powers – the permanent members of the UN Security Council. According to Minister Fidan's assertion, only one element of the treaty – the prevention of nuclear weapons proliferation – is effectively implemented, while advancements in nuclear disarmament and the provision of assistance to other nations for the development of atomic energy for peaceful applications remain unfulfilled. The remarks by the Turkish foreign minister were articulated amidst Ankara's apprehension concerning Iran's capacity for developing nuclear weaponry and were subsequently interpreted within the expert community as indicative of Turkey's potential willingness to reconsider its international commitments as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The most recent statement by Hakan Fidan contains more specific signals. In it, the Turkish official did not simply once again focus attention on Ankara's dissatisfaction with the legal restrictions of the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" and its anachronism as a whole, but almost directly articulated the presence of Turkey's ambitions in the field of nuclear armament.

6. Regional balance: Iran and Israel

In essence, Fidan's declaration constitutes an act of political leverage, equally directed at both the United States and Iran, which are currently engaged in intensive negotiations concerning the future of Tehran's nuclear program. Fidan has strategically selected this moment to articulate his demands, recognizing that doing so further exacerbates the situation surrounding Iran. In his assessment, this represents an advantageous scenario for Ankara. The assertion that, in the event of Tehran's persistent refusal to abandon its nuclear program, "*other regional countries will begin to strive for the possession of nuclear weapons*" is clearly intended to prompt Washington toward a radicalization of its negotiating posture and, potentially, toward military action against the Islamic Republic. It is evident that Fidan has in mind Saudi Arabia, possibly Egypt, and, indeed, Turkey itself as prospective candidates for nuclear weapons capability.

The implication is unambiguously transparent: should the U.S. fail to terminate Tehran's nuclear ambitions, either through diplomacy or military intervention, the consequence will be an uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear aspirations across the entire Middle Eastern region. Furthermore, if Iran, in turn, does not voluntarily relinquish its own program and, under a convergence of certain circumstances, manages to safeguard the relevant infrastructure from an American strike, it will be compelled to accept that its potential regional rivals and adversaries will also pursue an independent course toward the mastery of combat nuclear technologies. Moreover, it is quite probable that they will achieve this ultimate objective, lagging only marginally behind Tehran in terms of time.

Thus, Fidan distinctly conveys that Turkey will not tolerate the immediate proximity of a new nuclear power and will regard it as its sovereign prerogative to attain nuclear status by circumventing the effectively defunct – as demonstrated by the case of Iran – “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”. Fundamentally, this represents a significant political and diplomatic blow to Tehran's standing, delivered by Turkey at the very peak of the crisis surrounding the Islamic Republic. It is not improbable that, among other factors, the awareness of Ankara's stance was precisely what compelled Tehran in January to categorically reject Turkish mediation in negotiations with the American side, opting instead for the objectively neutral Oman as a platform for contact with its opponents.

If one accepts that Turkey is genuinely interested in the “de-atomization” of Iran and the preservation of the regional balance of power, as articulated by Hakan Fidan, a pertinent question emerges: how does Ankara intend to realize its own nuclear ambitions – which, according to expert evidence, are supported by extensive secret development in cooperation with its ally Pakistan – if it is deprived of a geopolitical justification comparable to the Iranian case? The absence of new “nuclear competitors” in the region removes Turkey's ability to legitimize its claims to nuclear status. Under conditions where the existing nuclear balance is maintained, any attempts by Ankara to advance such initiatives will inevitably encounter significant opposition, not only from the United States but also from Russia and China.

Analysis of Ankara's behavior suggests that Israel functions as the regional entity whose nuclear capability Turkey could potentially cite in the future to justify its own “nuclear ambitions”. From this perspective, the current reality that Israel does not officially acknowledge possession of a nuclear arsenal (estimated by various sources to contain between 100 and 300 tactical warheads) and is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is highly advantageous to Ankara. This situation potentially affords Turkey the opportunity to continue developing its own military program and to construct an arsenal adhering to the principle of a reciprocal Israeli strategy of denial. Paradoxically, despite Tel Aviv's efforts to restrict the expansion of Ankara's regional influence and its nuclear aspirations in practical terms, the political-ideological dimension appears to contribute to the legitimization of Turkish claims to the status of a possessor, albeit an undeclared one of a conventional weapon of mass destruction.

It is evident, however, that at the present juncture, Ankara has opted to defer the utilization of the “*Israeli nuclear issue*” for its own purposes, concentrating primarily on the neutralization of the perceived Iranian “nuclear threat”. This initiative appears to stem from Hakan Fidan, who has purportedly convinced President R. T. Erdogan of the necessity for circumspection in anti-Israel discourse and the redirection of all efforts toward forestalling

the involvement of other regional competitors in the nuclear arms race. Turkey is understandably concerned by the prospect that the U.S., concurrent with its actions aimed at the “*nuclear deactivation*” of Iran, is contemplating the potential transfer of uranium enrichment technologies to Saudi Arabia. While this prospective agreement officially posits the development of a “*peaceful atom*” program in the Kingdom under IAEA oversight, a number of experts are already voicing apprehensions that it could furnish Riyadh with the fundamental capacity for the future development of its own combat arsenal.

7. The New Normality of the Middle East

Nevertheless, the “*nuclear race*” in the region, a scenario that Hakan Fidan warned could develop, has in fact already commenced. Existing data suggest that Turkey actively became involved in this trend well before recent events. Given the fundamental shifts occurring globally and the new polarization of powers, maintaining the nuclear balance in the Middle East and its adjacent areas appears to be an unrealistic objective. The critical issue is the degree of oversight exerted by leading world powers during the reordering of this security balance, determining which nations will successfully capitalize on this transformation to become regional nuclear powers and which will be compelled to remain outside this process or even face fragmentation.