

**The conflict between Turkey and the terror-stamped Kurdish PKK has escalated in recent times. There is a risk of slowing down Sweden's path towards a possible NATO membership.**

One year ago, on April 20, 2021, Sweden's Ambassador to Turkey was summoned to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara. There he received a protest against the fact that Minister of Defense Peter Hultqvist participated in a video conference with the commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) a few days earlier.

Criticism was also leveled at the fact that Foreign Minister Ann Linde had had meetings with "terrorist elements" and at the fact that contacts with the SDF had intensified.

The SDF - an abbreviation of "Syrian Democratic Forces" - is the military militia that in Syria became the United States' main ally on the ground in the war against the terrorist group IS.

Today, it controls most of northeastern Syria. There are also camps with IS prisoners, including Swedish women and children. This is a significant reason for the many Swedish contacts with SDF and it was also a topic that was discussed at the video conference in which Peter Hultqvist participated.

However, Turkey regards the SDF as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It is a group that has been branded a terrorist by the USA, the EU and Turkey and which has been in armed conflict with the Turkish state for almost four decades.

The SDF consists for the most part of forces from the People's Defense Units (YPG), which is the armed branch of the PKK's Syrian sister party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Prior to 2015, peace talks were held between the PKK and the Turkish state, but when they broke down, one of the bloodiest periods in the long conflict began. Since then, almost 6,000 people have been killed in total - Turkish soldiers, PKK members and civilians.

Last week, a new Turkish offensive was launched against PKK strongholds in northern Iraq, shortly after the Prime Minister of Iraq's Kurdish regime visited Ankara. He welcomed "enhanced cooperation to promote security and stability" in northern Iraq, which is interpreted by many as not opposing the Turkish offensive.

Last week, two bombings were also carried out in the Turkish cities of Istanbul and Bursa. Turkey accuses two left-wing groups of carrying out the act on behalf of the PKK.

All this has turned up the temperature in the conflict between Turkey and the PKK, which could cause problems for Sweden in a possible NATO application.

- Yes, Swedish connections and Swedish support for the PKK and PYD can make Swedish membership in NATO more difficult. This is what Aylin Ünver Noi, associate professor of international relations at Haliç University in Istanbul, tells SvD.

NATO is a defense alliance based on collective defense. According to Article 5 of its statutes, all members are expected to take the measures they deem necessary to assist an attacked ally. That is why it is important to be able to trust each other.

- That is the core and the main purpose of the alliance. So the slightest mistrust, misunderstanding or ignorance must be eliminated, says Aylin Ünver Noi.

- If Sweden wants to become a member of NATO, it must show solidarity with Turkey in its fight against separatist terrorism, she says.

All 30 NATO members, including Turkey, must approve each new member. And although Turkey is generally positive about NATO enlargement, there may be questions that need to be addressed before Turkey is prepared to say yes to a defense alliance, says Aylin Ünver Noi.

When it comes to Sweden, there is only one issue to discuss.

- Sweden's attitude to the PKK has been the main subject of dispute for many years. Turkey believes that Sweden is ignoring its need for national security.

Some in the Turkish media have pointed out that a possible Swedish NATO application should be used to try to influence Swedish policy towards the Kurds. Others have warned that it could be risky because it could appear that Turkey is on Russia's side.

But even if the Turkish government refrains from vetoing Swedish NATO membership, it is not entirely certain that Sweden's path to NATO is ready for it.

- No, because even if Turkey does not want to create problems for NATO right now, the ruling AKP party is allied with an ultranationalist party, MHP, and that party is a real hawk in the Kurdish question. This is what Paul Levin, associate professor and director of the Department of Turkey Studies at Stockholm University, tells SvD.

- It is conceivable that the MHP could raise this issue when ratifying a new NATO treaty with Sweden.

For the Turkish parliament must also vote yes and it is not always as it votes as the government wants. In connection with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, the Turkish parliament opposed the government. It stopped a Turkish participation in the invasion and no foreign troops were given access to Turkish land for that purpose.