The relationship between Turkey and Australia is in its worst crisis in modern times as a result of extraordinary, provocative and unreasonable comments from the Turkish President.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan took the astonishing step of threatening the lives of innocent Australians who may travel to Turkey.

He said if they came to Turkey with anti-Muslim sentiments, they would return in coffins “like their grandfathers”, a reference to the Anzacs who died in Turkey in World War I.

Against the repeated objections of the New Zealand government, Erdogan has been showing video of the terrorist atrocity in Christchurch and using it as part of his stump speech for local elections in Turkey in 10 days.

This is a dismaying development. It is one of the most irresponsible and gratuitous efforts in demagoguery in the world today, by the leader of what, even a couple of decades ago, was an exemplary, tolerant and democratic society.

Scott Morrison was right to express anger and disappointment at the remarks, to reject them utterly and to ask for their clarification or withdrawal.

Bill Shorten and senior members of the opposition expressed similar sentiments.

When Australians are gratuitously attacked rhetorically and put at risk like this, it is right for the major parties to look for and find bipartisanship.
Erdogan is obviously playing the religio/nationalist card inside Turkish politics, but Morrison is right to say he doesn’t accept the excuse that because something is said during an election campaign, it doesn’t matter.

In every way, Erdogan’s comments are a tragedy.

The Turkish community in Australia has been highly successful and made a serious, positive contribution to Australia.

It should not be associated with Erdogan’s remarks.

The implications of Erdogan’s remarks are truly appalling.

First, the Turkish leader is dancing to the terrorist’s tune. It is impossible to know everything about the Christchurch gunman’s motives but he certainly wanted to create division between people and between nations.

Second, Erdogan is needlessly, capriciously, threatening the long friendship that has built up between Turkey and Australia. There is a quality of moral beauty in this friendship, based on the generous words of Ataturk and the determination of Turks and Australians alike not only to honour their pasts but to transcend conflict and build a relationship of international friendship.

Turks have been generous participants in this friendship. To throw it all away for the sake of a few days’ rabble-rousing on the hustings is unspeakably sad.

Third, Erdogan is taking the crimes of the Christchurch gunman and attributing moral blame for them to the Australian government and nation. Yet Morrison and Shorten and every Australian in a position of political or social authority condemned the killings instantly and expressed grief and solidarity for the victims.

Turkey, like most nations, has produced some terrorists. Erdogan frequently denounces them. Yet it would be absurd for any other nation or any other leader to blame Erdogan for the crimes of any terrorist who happens to be a Turk.

Morrison was very angry but very measured yesterday. He had in mind the safety of Australians in Turkey and all the possible permutations of what might happen at Anzac Day commemorations in Gallipoli this year.
Erdogan could easily withdraw all official security support for the commemoration. At some official level then, it couldn’t go ahead. Yet many Australians would still go to Anzac Cove and be at increased risk.

The next logical step would be Australia withdrawing its ambassador for consultations. It is difficult to see if that happened how this year’s Anzac commemorations could go forward.

Two final reflections. Disruptive dictators who practise brinkmanship and defy conventions and norms, such as Erdogan or Russia’s Vladimir Putin, are extremely difficult for democratic societies to deal with.

Democratic societies rely on the rule-based order.

And finally, those elements of the progressive Left in Australia who routinely defame their own nation and paint it as uniquely intolerant are not only wrong morally and intellectually — they do serious damage because their dishonest misrepresentations affect the way Australia is seen internationally.

Despite the fact that one Australian citizen committed an act of vile terrorism and mass murder in Christchurch, Australia is one of the most successful, diverse immigrant societies in the world.

Demonising ourselves far beyond reality contributes not to moral betterment, but to conflict.

**GREG SHERIDAN, FOREIGN EDITOR**

Greg Sheridan, The Australian’s foreign editor, is one of the nation’s most influential national security commentators, who is active across television and radio and also writes extensively on culture. He has w... Read more

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