



 REPORT ARAB REGIONAL SECURITY

From Zero Problems to Zero Friends?

The Past, Present, and Future of Turkey's Role in Regional Security Cooperation

FEBRUARY 21, 2018 — SELIM CAN SAZAK AND CAGLAR KURC

For decades, Turkey was a rarity: a secular democracy with a Muslim majority, a liberal economy, and a solid alliance with the West. It was NATO's only Muslim-majority country and, for a brief while, the likeliest candidate to carry the same distinction as a member of the European Union (EU). Traditionally, Ankara's foreign policy has been Western-oriented, in support of the status quo, and noninterventionist.¹ This posture was based on four principles: having reserved relations with the region, maintaining neutrality in cases of conflict, opposing attempts to revise the status quo, and isolating Turkey's regional policies from its relations with the great powers.² Even though Turkey was widely promoted as a model for the Middle East, it had little interest in or appetite for getting involved in the region.³

Against this current, there has always been an opposing camp vying for a more activist foreign policy. The Islamists were particularly strong in this camp: they were ardently anticommunist, they had an ideological commitment to Muslim solidarity, and they believed that Turkey's imperial legacies created a historical responsibility for leadership of the Middle East.⁴ To paraphrase Turkish intellectual Celal Yalınz (better known as Sakallı Celal), Ankara's efforts to be a part of the West were similar to running westward on the deck of an eastbound ship, as Turkey's security, economy, and identity were tied to the fortunes of its neighbors in the region.⁵ Turkish foreign policy has been a tug-of-war between these two traditions since the mid-1950s, when the government of conservative firebrand Adnan Menderes's Democratic Party made an ill-fated bid for regional influence: the so-called Baghdad Pact, which brought the country to the brink of war with Syria and Iraq.⁶

When the Islamists came to power in 2002, under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkish foreign policy underwent a complete overhaul.⁷ By the end of AKP's first decade, however, the EU accession process, which had buoyed the AKP's early success, slowed to a crawl.⁸ As Europe grew wary of Turkey's prospective membership, Turkey's political consensus on EU membership unraveled.⁹ The U.S.-led 2003 invasion of Iraq also eroded the Turkish public's positive views of the West.¹⁰ Erdogan's AKP seized this moment to back away from the politically expensive reform agenda, break free from Turkey's traditional foreign policy, and pivot to the Middle East.¹¹ The central pillars of this neo-Ottomanist turn were former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu's "zero-problems" doctrine and his views on expanding Turkey's strategic depth.¹² At first, Ankara's sole objective was to develop good relations with all of Turkey's neighbors.¹³ Building on the legacy of his predecessor, Ismail Cem,¹⁴ Davutoglu directed AKP to normalize Turkey's relations with Greece and Cyprus.¹⁵ He also led an ill-fated charge for reconciliation with Armenia.¹⁶ Over time, however, the "zero-problems" doctrine took an even more ambitious turn: the "settlement of all disputes" that "directly or indirectly concern Turkey."¹⁷ In his bid to expand Turkey's global power, Davutoglu expanded the country's interests further into Africa, the Balkans, and even Latin America and East Asia.¹⁸ As a result, Turkey took it upon itself to play peacemaker between Israel and Syria, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah, Iran and the West, and the warring parties in Somalia.¹⁹

The bigger Turkey's ambitions grew, however, the smaller its victories shrank.²⁰ Most of Turkey's mediation efforts failed.²¹ The signature initiatives of Turkey's "zero-problems" doctrine, such as rapprochement with Armenia and reconciliation in Cyprus, produced more noise than results. Some others—like voting against Iran sanctions, flinching at hosting NATO X-Band radars in its territory, and supporting the Kurdistan Regional Government as a wholly independent entity from Baghdad in Iraq—vexed both the West and Turkey's regional neighbors.²²

With the civil war in Syria, Turkey's foreign policy finally faced the fate its critics long feared. Ankara sank deep into the morass it had been expected to change by its example. Turkey became caught in a three-way fight with two groups that it considers terrorists—the Kurdish-separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the radical jihadist Islamic State—as well as a secretive cult, the Gulenists, that used to be closely allied with Erdogan but is now accused of orchestrating the failed coup of July 2016.²³ Turkey is sailing into a perfect storm of political instability, economic fragility, and social upheaval.

In such an environment, the prospects of involving Turkey in any cooperative efforts to increase regional security might seem bleak. However, this report argues that Turkey can still be a valuable and effective partner in certain areas. First, it discusses how the end of the Cold War brought to the fore the dissonance between NATO's grand strategy and Turkey's security concerns. Then, it examines the neo-Ottomanist turn in Turkish foreign policy, arguing that it was motivated primarily by security concerns and not by economic or identity-based consideration. It then identifies three areas for cooperation: preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, combating PKK and Islamic State terrorism, and resolving the refugee crisis.

Order from Ashes

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Turkey's Post-Cold War Juncture

Turkey's membership in the Atlantic Alliance has long been a defining feature of its foreign policy. Its entry into the Western security structure, however, was not a straightforward development. Modern Turkey's founding father, Kemal Atatürk, viewed independence as a pillar of Turkish foreign policy, and his legacy left an indelible mark. During World

War II, for example, Ismet Inonu—Ataturk’s second-in-command and his successor as the country’s president—played a delicate balancing act to keep Turkey out of the war.²⁴ After 1945, however, Turkey found itself facing rising Russian expansionism, including Moscow’s territorial claims on eastern Anatolia and demands for a renegotiation of the 1936 Montreux Convention, which gave Turkey sole control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.²⁵

Against this tense political backdrop, Ankara started lobbying hard for membership into NATO as a defense against the Soviets. In its early years, Turkey’s efforts to join NATO were repeatedly rebuffed.²⁶ The Truman Doctrine, however, opened the path for Turkish membership. According to the new U.S. strategic calculations, Turkey’s key geographic location and its control of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles made it crucial to limiting Soviet influence in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.



A LARGE FIRE BURNS AS KURDS FROM TURKEY AND SYRIA CELEBRATE KURDISH NEW YEAR ON MARCH 21, 2015 IN DIYARBAKIR, TURKEY. DIYARBAKIR HAS ONE OF THE LARGEST KURDISH POPULATIONS IN TURKEY AND HAS BECOME HOME TO LARGE NUMBERS OF SYRIAN KURDS FLEEING THE CIVIL WAR IN THEIR HOME COUNTRY. A NUMBER OF REFUGEES FROM NEARBY CAMPS ALSO TRAVELLED TO ATTEND THE EVENT, THE LARGEST KURDISH NEW YEAR CELEBRATIONS IN TURKEY. SOURCE: CARL COURT/GETTY IMAGES.

During the Korean War, Turks proved themselves to be a potent fighting force.²⁷ The five thousand soldiers of the Turkish Brigade fought alongside the United States’ Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division in Korea and received unit citations for their valor and bravery.²⁸ “The Turks are the hero of heroes,” General Douglas MacArthur said of his Turkish soldiers. “There is no impossibility for the Turkish Brigade.”²⁹ The reward for Turkey’s trial by combat was its accession to NATO in 1952, along with its western neighbor, Greece.³⁰

NATO’s grand strategy was purposefully ambiguous on the Middle East.³¹ Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO’s founding and namesake document, required that Turkey be fully included in the contingency plans for the area to be

defended against external attacks—namely, from the Soviet threat. However, the Alliance viewed the Middle East as being outside its responsibility, so long as it did not fall under Soviet influence and vital supply routes from the oil-rich Gulf region remained secure.³² NATO's primary objective, to protect Western Europe against the Soviet threat and over-involvement in the Middle East, risked provoking Soviet aggression.

Turkey, too, had little interest for the Middle East beyond its borders. The trauma of imperial collapse—particularly the 1916–18 Arab Revolt, which Turks refer to as the “Arab betrayal”—left a lasting scar on the country's collective consciousness.³³ This trauma also resonated in the newly founded republic's strategic culture: the republican policy elites aspired to make Turkey part of the West and wanted nothing to do with the Middle East. As far as they were concerned, the Middle East was a civilizational backwater and a morass of problems in which Ankara did not need to be involved.³⁴

For most of the Cold War, Turkey had a fraught relationship with its Middle Eastern neighbors. Relations with Iran deteriorated after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, as the secular regime in Ankara viewed Tehran's mullahs as a dangerous influence on Turkey's own Islamists.³⁵ Syria and Iraq were Soviet allies, and Turkey's historic relations were fraught with competing territorial claims over the province of Hatay on the Mediterranean coast (claimed by Syria)³⁶ and the city of Mosul, Iraq,³⁷ as well as the issue of control over the Tigris-Euphrates river system.³⁸ An armed conflict with either country, however, could have led to an escalation with the Soviet Union. Understandably, no NATO member was willing to take such a risk, and Ankara's allies regularly reminded it to keep a low profile in the region.

Turkey's force posture also reflected these strategic considerations. Under NATO's grand strategy, Turkey's role was “bottling up the Soviet navy in the Black Sea, tying up Warsaw Pact forces along NATO's southern flank, and serving as a staging ground for a counterthrust against the Soviet Union.”³⁹ Thus, Turkey's security posture was oriented toward the north, with the bulk of its military tied up on the Caucasian border, as well as a sizable contingent on the Bulgarian border.⁴⁰ Such a posture, however, left Turkey with hardly any military capability for a credible deterrent to its southeastern neighbors. Starting in the mid-1970s, this posture became a problem for Turkey's own security. Even though Syria and Iraq were supporting the militant groups fighting Turkey—first the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, and then the PKK—Ankara could not take action against its neighbors because its forces were deployed elsewhere.

Ankara was also vexed that its allies were ambivalent toward its security interests but were deeply committed to Israel's. Per its traditional policy, Ankara feared getting entangled in conflict more than it feared an aggressive action from the region, and was particularly struck by how the United States came to the brink of war with the Soviet Union during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Turkey maintained a position of neutrality in the Arab-Israeli dispute, but during the war the

Soviets deployed MiG-21 bomber planes “to an airbase ‘on the border’—presumably with Turkey,”⁴¹ which left Ankara fearing that it would be drawn into a U.S.-led operation to defend Israel against the Arabs.⁴² Around the same time, the embargoes following Turkey’s 1974 incursion into Cyprus had left the country dependent on Arab oil.⁴³ Moreover, the Arab-Israeli conflict had become a hot-button issue for the domestic public: on the left, guerrilla groups like the Turkish Popular Liberation Front had organic ties with the Palestine Liberation Organization;⁴⁴ on the right, religious conservatives saw Palestine as a cause for Muslim solidarity.⁴⁵

With the end of the Cold War, the strategic dissonance in Turkey’s alliance of necessity with the West became even more apparent. In this regard, the 1991 Gulf War was a critical juncture. Even though Turkey had had its disagreements with Iraq and Iran, it had a stable relationship with both based on mutual interests. During the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, Turkey remained neutral, choosing to keep its relations with both sides.⁴⁶ The three countries also had a shared interest in curbing Kurdish aspirations for independence. Both Baghdad and Tehran regularly allowed Turkey’s cross-border raids in pursuit of PKK fighters.⁴⁷

In the period leading up to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, however, Ankara was increasingly worried about Baghdad’s nuclear ambitions, growing missile arsenal, and saber-rattling rhetoric. Therefore, Turkey strongly supported the international response to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, passing a series of economic sanctions, including the shutdown of the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline.⁴⁸ With the Soviet threat no longer a concern, Turkey was able to move 100,000 mechanized troops from the Bulgarian border to the Iraqi border, per the American request for a military buildup to put pressure on Baghdad in the lead-up to Operation Desert Storm.⁴⁹ President Turgut Ozal not only opened Incirlik to American soldiers but strongly lobbied to deploy Turkish soldiers in Iraq along with them—allegedly, during a September 1990 meeting with President Bush, he even asked for U.S. support to annex Mosul and Kirkuk.⁵⁰ Ozal’s ambitions were curbed only by the resignation of his foreign minister and chief of general staff in protest of his policies.⁵¹

Even though Turkey took a backseat in the Gulf War, its changing force posture and modernizing military gave it more confidence to throw its weight around in the region. The first half of the 1990s saw a growing power competition between Iran and Turkey, particularly for the dominance over the post-Soviet states in the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁵² Ankara accused Tehran of supporting religious extremism in Turkey, alleged that Iran was involved in the assassination of prominent secular intellectuals, and protested that PKK militants were finding safe haven on the Iranian side of the border.⁵³ Iran’s weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities, nuclear ambitions, and ever-expanding ballistic missile program were also considered a threat.⁵⁴

Relations with Syria were similarly strained. Damascus was building ballistic missiles, was in possession of chemical and biological weapons, and was believed to be developing nuclear capabilities until an Israeli airstrike destroyed its al-Kibar site in 2007.⁵⁵ The particular source of contention, however, was the PKK. Syria's support for militant groups, including the PKK, had been an issue since the 1980s.⁵⁶ The PKK operated training camps in Lebanon's Syrian-controlled Beqaa Valley; its leader Abdullah Ocalan "lived in a district of Damascus normally off limits to foreigners; acquired a villa in that city, travelled in a red Mercedes provided by the Syrians, and enjoyed the protection of bodyguards from that state."⁵⁷ Turkey's many *démarches* for Ocalan's ouster, however, never bore fruit.⁵⁸ Turkey lacked a credible military deterrent: Hafez al-Assad knew all too well that Turkish forces were tied up elsewhere and that its allies in the West had no desire to entangle themselves in the Middle East.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the situation changed. Not only was Turkey unshackled of its Cold War-era force posture, but it had also gained the capability to launch a comprehensive ground operation, on short notice, with the involvement of tens of thousands of fully equipped mechanized troops. It also had acquired new platforms like F-16 combat aircraft, Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk and AH-1W Super Cobra helicopters, and Boeing K-135R refueling aircraft.⁵⁹ In late 1998, these new conditions forced Hafez al-Assad's regime to give Ocalan up at last.⁶⁰ On September 16 of that year, Turkish Army chief of staff Atilla Ates organized a press conference on the Syrian border, telling journalists that "[our] patience with Damascus is wearing thin."⁶¹ On October 1, in his address to the parliament, President Suleyman Demirel gave an ultimatum to Damascus, saying "time is running out."⁶² The last message came from Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz on October 7. "This is our last warning," Yilmaz said at a speech to the parliament. "Either Damascus ceases its support for terrorists or we will."⁶³ The message was clear, the stakes were higher than ever, and Damascus no longer had Moscow to lean on. The following day, on October 8, Ocalan was out of Syria.⁶⁴ Ping-ponging around the globe for about four months, Ocalan was captured in Nairobi in February 1999 and brought back to Turkey.⁶⁵ Initially sentenced to death by hanging, Ocalan's sentence was later commuted to life at the island prison of Imrali.⁶⁶

The Gulf War not only allowed Turkey to turn its attention to its Middle Eastern neighbors but also gave Turkey and Israel the opportunity to build on their relationship. In 1949, Turkey became the first Muslim country to recognize Israel.⁶⁷ Its history with the Jewish people, however, goes back half a millennium. When the 1492 Alhambra Decree expelled all Jews from Spain, the Ottoman Empire welcomed them. The Sephardim enjoyed power and influence over the Ottoman court, commerce, and diplomacy, and they maintained this privileged position during the republic as well.⁶⁸ Jewish members of Ataturk's inner circle included his personal dentist Sami Gunzberg,⁶⁹ chief rabbi Chaim Nahum Effendi,⁷⁰ and pan-Turkist ideologue Moiz Cohen (who later Turkified his name as Munis Tekinalp).⁷¹ In the 1930s—a time of rising anti-Semitism across Europe—Ataturk's Turkey welcomed some two hundred German-Jewish emigre scientists and intellectuals.⁷²

Turkish-Israeli relations, however, have been volatile, ebbing and flowing according to geopolitical imperatives, domestic politics, and ideological impulses.⁷³ Until the 1960s, the desires of David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first prime minister, from 1955 to 1963) for stronger bilateral relations were stymied by Turkey's conservative turn under the administration of Adnan Menderes (Turkish prime minister from 1950 to 1960).⁷⁴ The 1956 Suez Crisis also took its toll: the Turkish Legation in Israel was downgraded to the level of chargé d'affaires in 1956 and was not restored until a decade later.⁷⁵ The Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973, the OPEC oil crisis, and Turkey's 1974 invasion of Cyprus all blocked the path for a meaningful improvement in bilateral relations.⁷⁶ Turkey restored its diplomatic representation in Israel to ambassadorial level in January 1980—for the first time since 1956—but this state of affairs lasted only six months. That July, the Knesset passed the controversial Jerusalem Law, which declared Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel. Turkey once again withdrew its ambassador from Israel.⁷⁷

Turkish-Israeli relations entered a growth path in the 1990s.⁷⁸ Reduced trade with Arab countries, lack of Arab support on key issues, and bilateral disputes with Iraq and Syria were all key factors in this new entente.⁷⁹ The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords improved the Turkish public's opinion of Israel.⁸⁰ Diplomatic relations were restored at the ambassadorial level in late 1991, and a series of high-profile visits from civilian and military leadership followed.⁸¹ A pivotal moment came in 1996 when the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement⁸² including joint trainings with the Israeli air force and navy; permission for Israeli surveillance flights along Turkey's Iraqi, Syrian, and Iranian borders; cooperation in counterterrorism; and a \$590 million contract for Israel to upgrade fifty-four Turkish F-4 fighter jets.⁸³ Cooperation with Israel in the second half of the 1990s gave Turkey access to specialized equipment like thermal sensors and night-vision cameras, crucial for its operations against the PKK, and allowed the country to break free of the informal arms embargo it faced in the West over human rights concerns in its campaign against Kurdish militants.⁸⁴ Several "foreign military sales" contracts with the U.S. Congress fell apart for similar reasons,⁸⁵ and pressure from Greek American and Armenian American lobbying groups also influenced these decisions.⁸⁶ In such an environment, Israel was the perfect partner for Turkey.

Israel found a similar security logic in this partnership,⁸⁷ one connected with the defensive nature of its presumed nuclear capabilities and its missile defense shield. Even if the Israeli shield could be overpowered by a large-scale ballistic missile attack, access to Turkish airspace—which bordered three of Israel's four major adversaries (Iraq, Iran, and Syria)—could give Israel the forward-defense capability needed to conduct preemptive or preventive strikes.⁸⁸ Reflecting the emphasis that it placed on the interoperability with its Turkish counterparts, Israel was a regular participant in advanced aerial combat (Anatolian Eagle) and naval search-and-rescue (Reliant Mermaid) joint training exercises with Turkey from their inception in the late 1990s to the crisis that ensued after the 2008–9 Gaza War.⁸⁹ Moreover, Turkish ports in the eastern Mediterranean gave the Israeli navy the offshore strategic depth it needed to sustain a credible second-strike capability: the 1996 military cooperation agreement provided that the two countries

could deploy their land, air, and naval force units in each other's territory and use each other's airspace, airbases, and naval ports.⁹⁰ Turkey was Israel's "virtual strategic depth."⁹¹

The Neo-Ottomanist Turn: Three Lenses

It was against this backdrop that Turkey's Islamists—Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP—came to power. In many ways, AKP's rise to power was a paradigm shift in Turkish politics, and the country's foreign policy also felt its share of this transformation.⁹² As explained above, Turkey's Islamists were longtime critics of Ankara's policy of indifference toward the Middle East. They were not champions of Turkey's participation in the Atlantic Alliance either, but they bore it throughout the Cold War as a necessary evil to ward off the communist threat. Only a year into office, however, they found themselves facing a crisis out of left field—the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq—that entirely changed Turkey's strategic landscape.

One of the George W. Bush administration's demands of Turkey in the lead-up to the invasion was the stationing of large numbers of U.S. troops in Turkish territory to open a northern theater against Saddam Hussein. It also wanted to use Incirlik Air Force Base in southeast Turkey, as it had done in 1991. The second time, however, was not going to be as easy. The 1991 experience had left a bitter memory among Turks. Ankara had only warily agreed to the no-fly zone in the first place, worried that it would work to the PKK's benefit.⁹³ The United States' close collaboration with Kurdish Peshmerga and the PKK's resurgence in the years that followed the Gulf War left many in Ankara believing that Washington favored an independent Kurdistan next door to Turkey.⁹⁴ Therefore, when presented with the same choice a decade later, Turkey balked: despite intense lobbying from Erdogan and promises of billions of dollars in aid, the parliament refused to allow U.S. troops into the country.⁹⁵

Despite the many monographs written to extol its most notable architect—former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu—and the praise lavished on his vision, Turkey's "zero-problems" doctrine and its neo-Ottomanist turn was actually a decision made of necessity. In the academic literature, Turkey's neo-Ottomanist turn is often discussed as an "axis shift" reorienting Turkey toward the Muslim-majority countries, in line with AKP's ideological commitments.⁹⁶ Some, like Tarik Oguzlu, opposed the notion, arguing that it was not a dissociation from the West but a pragmatic move to increase Turkey's chances of EU membership by diversifying its foreign policy options elsewhere.⁹⁷ Onis and Yilmaz similarly claimed AKP's shift from deep-Europeanization to soft-Eurasianism showed continuity with Ankara's traditional emphasis on multilateralism in foreign policy.⁹⁸ Others have explained Turkey's foreign policy shift as a reflection of its expanding commercial interests in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.⁹⁹

There is no denying that Turkey's neo-Ottomanist turn had a profound influence on its foreign policy and left myriad controversies in its wake. AKP policies "remain essentially nationalist, Turkey-centric, and commercially opportunistic," Hugh Pope wrote in 2010.¹⁰⁰ "It is a misconception to think of them as Islamist, or even ideological." Indeed, even in earlier times described as a nadir in relations, Turkey and the West kept business as usual in key security and intelligence matters.¹⁰¹ Turkey's drift from the West and turn toward authoritarianism seem to have been fairly recent phenomena.

Identity

This strained state of affairs raises the question of what really caused the neo-Ottomanist turn. Given that the secular/Islamist divide is a central motif in Turkish politics, clashing identities might seem like a plausible explanation.¹⁰² The Turkish Republic was not the inevitable outcome of the War of Independence (1919–23). Many early revolutionaries were fervently loyal to the throne, and it was only because of a power grab by the small progressive faction around Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) that the modern Turkish Republic was born.¹⁰³ Since then, however, Turkish politics has been defined by a divide between the secular and statist "First Group"—Mustafa Kemal's Republican People's Party and its successors—and its opponents, known as the "Second Group," which branches within itself over disagreements around politicization of Islam and liberalization of economy.¹⁰⁴

Erdogan entered politics in the "National Outlook" tradition—the Second Group's Islamist, anti-Western, reactionary faction.¹⁰⁵ In this tradition, the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire were polar opposites.¹⁰⁶ By this token, neo-Ottomanism was an affirmation of the Ottoman past as a negation of the Republican present. It must be cautioned that AKP was a breakaway from this tradition, and that in his earlier years Erdogan sang an entirely different tune.¹⁰⁷ "The world has changed and so have I," Erdogan said in AKP's early days, and change he did.¹⁰⁸ Even though the National Outlook's old guard traditionally denounced the EU as a "Christian Club' governed under the Pope's directives," Erdogan and his comrades managed to convince the party to take a pro-EU turn.¹⁰⁹ Right after the November 2002 elections, Erdogan declared that his party's priority was not the "headscarf issue" but Turkey's accession to the EU.¹¹⁰ What paved the path for political Islam's success was recasting social conservatism in the parlance of liberal democracy—it opposed secularism not because it is apostasy but because it restricts individual freedoms. Likewise, it challenged military tutelage not as Kemalist idolatry but as an obstacle to democratic development.¹¹¹

It would be naive to deny that AKP's neo-Ottomanism was at least partly motivated by its Islamist identity.¹¹² Foreign Minister Davutoglu's writings, for example, combined a more assertive foreign policy with a critique of the Kemalist regime in particular and the Eurocentric international order in general, highlighting incidents like Srebrenica and arguing that Islam has a separate political paradigm.¹¹³ It is also true that the "changing security discourses,"¹¹⁴ the

“demythologization of national security,”¹¹⁵ and the desecuritization of relations with neighbors like Iran and Syria¹¹⁶ contributed to AKP’s chances of political survival by breaking military tutelage and diminishing the military’s relevance to civilian politics.

The problem with this argument is that Erdogan’s AKP is neither the first nor the only party to espouse this identity. If AKP’s neo-Ottomanism is defined narrowly as a cultural affinity with the former Ottoman hinterland, a disdain for the West deriving from the perceived cultural differences, and a pragmatic acknowledgment that Turkey’s interests are not best served with a pro-Western orientation, there is nothing new about it.¹¹⁷ If AKP’s neo-Ottomanism is defined as a negation of Turkey’s Republican project, then it is equally difficult to explain how this agenda managed to garner such wide-ranging support beyond AKP’s conservative core or why AKP undertook such ambitious reforms in pursuit of EU membership in the party’s early years.

Trade

An alternative explanation of Turkey’s neo-Ottomanist turn is the country’s expanding commercial interests. The year before AKP came to power, Turkey witnessed one of the worst economic crises in its history, after a series of bank failures and a period of political instability following the collapse of the country’s fragile coalition government.¹¹⁸ In a single year, the economy shrank by 9.4 percent¹¹⁹ and the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita declined by more than 6 percent.¹²⁰ In AKP’s first decade in power, however, the trend was reversed. The markets viewed AKP’s strong single-party rule as a welcome departure from decades of fragile coalition governments.¹²¹ The 2001 crisis had forced Turkey to accept fairly radical structural reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which brought the country’s persistently high inflation under control.¹²² Turkey’s EU bid also buoyed optimism about the continuity of economic and political reforms.¹²³

The results were impressive. Turkey beat global markets with an average annual growth of 5.2 percent from 2002 to 2012, becoming the seventeenth largest economy in the world, with a GDP of \$789 billion.¹²⁴ Inflation came down to single digits for the first time in thirty years.¹²⁵ The economic success—which came to be known as the “Turkish miracle”—was also central to AKP’s political success: in a 2012 survey by Gurkaynak and Sayek-Boke, approximately 85 percent of the respondents who had voted for AKP said that they did so “because of the economy.”¹²⁶

A key dimension of this economic success was the growth in trade. Turkey’s total foreign trade volume increased from \$72 billion in 2001 to \$400 billion in 2014.¹²⁷ Even though Western allies like Germany and the United States remained Turkey’s largest trading partners, Turkey was also expanding its economic footprint in its periphery. From 1996 to 2010,

Turkey's trade with the Middle East grew more than eightfold. By 2011, trade volume had reached \$11 billion with Iraq, \$16 billion with Iran, and \$30 billion with Russia.¹²⁸

Some outcomes of Turkey's foreign policy shift can be explained by this logic. For example, it has been argued that the global financial crisis in the West and Turkey's new trade relations in the East helped make its relations with the West more dispensable.¹²⁹ The same dynamic was believed to bear on Turkish-Israeli relations: Turkey's trade with Israel "is lower than Libya, Algeria and the UAE," observed Gökhan Bacik, arguing that "such a weak economic tie falls well short of one that can sustain an enduring political rationale."¹³⁰ Similarly, the nuclear fuel swap deal Turkey tried to broker with Iran in 2011 was discussed as an unsuccessful effort to preserve Turkey's trade ties with the country.¹³¹

Yet as trade grew, so did the influence of business interest groups in foreign policy decisions.¹³² The big-business lobby (TUSIAD) played a key role in mobilizing support for the 2004 Annan Plan for Cyprus and was perhaps the most vocal champion of Turkey's bid for EU accession.¹³³ Moreover, TUSIAD's early support for the newly founded AKP was instrumental in breaking the stigma of political Islam and paving the path for the party's electoral success.¹³⁴ The Islamist business lobby (MUSIAD) operates like a separate foreign service throughout the Muslim world, with a strong presence in virtually every Muslim-majority country.¹³⁵ The national chamber of commerce (TOBB) was active in the eastern Mediterranean, leading an "Industry for Peace" initiative between Israelis and Palestinians in parallel with Turkey's mediation efforts in Palestine, and spearheading the formation of the "Levant Business Forum," an annual high-level gathering of business and political representatives from Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.¹³⁶ The Gulenists' business association (TUSKON) was particularly influential in Turkey's opening to Africa.¹³⁷

Even though Turkey's security doctrine considered a *de facto* Kurdish state in Iraq a *casus belli*, local business groups in the Kurdish-populated southeast, like the Diyarbakır Chamber of Commerce, were a formidable lobby for increased economic integration with the Kurdistan Regional Government.¹³⁸ The construction industry had a strong voice on matters involving the Caucasus and Central Asia, where Turkish companies had a sizable presence.¹³⁹ The American-Turkish Council, a U.S.-based lobby, was traditionally close to the American defense industry and an anchor to U.S.-Turkish defense cooperation until the deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations also took a toll on ATC's relations with Ankara in 2014.¹⁴⁰ Lobbying from business groups like the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council played a key role in the efforts for rapprochement with Armenia.¹⁴¹ Traders seemed to have become the sherpas guiding Turkish foreign policy.

Trade-based theories, however, are at a loss to explain some of Turkey's moves in recent years. One such example is the change in Turkey's Syria policy. Turkey's expanding partnership with Syria in the second half of the first decade of the century had spurred cross-border trade and tourism, and trade volume between the two countries more than tripled

from \$729 million in 2006 to an all-time high of \$2.3 billion in 2010.¹⁴² Following a mutual visa exemption in 2009, visits to and from Syria more than doubled: Turkey received approximately a million tourists from Syria and sent more than 1.5 million tourists.¹⁴³

These numbers may seem insignificant at first. In 2010, Turkey received more than 27 million tourists in total.¹⁴⁴ The same year, its trade with neighboring Iraq was almost \$7.5 billion—three times larger than its trade with Syria.¹⁴⁵ What this picture fails to appreciate, however, is the localized nature of trade and tourism with Syria. Mehmet Aslan, chairperson of the chamber of commerce in the southeastern city of Gaziantep, told journalists that with visitors decreasing “from sixty thousand per month to roughly one thousand, [Gaziantep] alone conceded about a billion dollars in tourist revenues. . . . Since Syria was our transit country to the Arab world, the transportation sector too has been [worst] hit and so has our trade with regional countries, with the hike in transportation costs hurting competitiveness and political instability stalling new investments.”¹⁴⁶ Hikmet Cincin, chairperson of the chamber of commerce in the border town of Hatay, said that Hatay’s cross-border trade, around a quarter-billion dollars in 2011, almost disappeared as truck traffic dwindled by 40 percent, and that the decline in tourism “has cost most shop owners in downtown Antakya a minimum of 20 percent.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, local economies bore a disproportionate amount of the cost of Turkey’s worsening relations with Syria.¹⁴⁸ It is also worth noting that many of these provinces also voted overwhelmingly for Erdogan.¹⁴⁹

A similar case could be made about the government’s recent showdown with the Gulen movement, a transnational religious network organized around Fethullah Gulen, an elusive cleric in self-exile in the United States since 1999. Gulen, a central figure in both Turkish politics and the country’s neo-Ottomanist turn,¹⁵⁰ was accused of orchestrating the 2015 coup attempt.¹⁵¹ Thanks to his movement’s schools, media, and businesses, he had gained such profound influence around the world that he even made it into Foreign Policy/Prospect’s “One Hundred Global Intellectuals” list in 2008.¹⁵² At the peak of their power at the end of the century’s first decade, the Gulenists were estimated to have up to ten million followers worldwide, more than two thousand educational institutions in 160 countries, and a business network believed to be worth \$20–\$50 billion.¹⁵³ The Gulenist business association TUSKON boasted more than fifty-five thousand members and was a crucial power base for Erdogan before it was shut down as part of the crackdown after the coup attempt.¹⁵⁴ The Gulenists were also influential in the bureaucracy, particularly over the police and the judiciary.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, their power had such deep roots that when Erdogan turned against his erstwhile allies, he accused them of having built a “state-within-the-state.”¹⁵⁶ The trade argument is at a loss to explain why Turkey sought policies that would have had a chilling effect on foreign direct investments because of increased political risks (geopolitical contagion from Syrian conflict) and investment risks (asset seizures targeting Gulenists).¹⁵⁷

Security

The prime factor behind Turkey's neo-Ottomanist turn was post-Cold War era geopolitics that forced it to reevaluate its security options in a rapidly changing strategic environment. Lacking a common enemy in the absence of the Soviet Union, Turkey and the United States no longer shared an existential threat perception. In the United States, the threat perception had shifted to the Middle East's "rogue states," including Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey, meanwhile, depended on these countries to effectively ward off Kurdish separatism, had growing trade relations with them, and was wary of any actions that would destabilize them.

As discussed above, Ocalan's capture and the subsequent decline of the PKK in the early years of the new century had transformed Turkey's strategic environment in the Middle East. Even though there remained issues in bilateral relations, the times offered an opportunity for a new foreign policy that would allow AKP to successfully pursue a quartet of policy objectives: (1) deny the PKK haven outside of Turkish borders, (2) moderate Kurdish politics by bringing Kurds into the political space, (3) break the secular military-bureaucracy's chokehold on politics through desecuritization, and (4) expand trade ties and cultural influence in the Middle East. In this regard, AKP's "zero-problems" policy was not solely aimed at good neighborly relations: it was a move to open the space for AKP's survival in Turkey's secular political space, which traditionally has been hostile to its fortunes.

It must be acknowledged that the "zero-problems" approach worked well enough up until the challenge posed first by the 2011 Arab uprisings and then by the Syrian civil war. The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq had become a crucial partner for Turkey.¹⁵⁸ The Erdogans and the Assads were close enough to pose for cameras during their 2008 family vacation in the Turkish Riviera (though three years later, Erdogan was to deny that he was ever on such cordial terms with the Syrian leader, a man he used to call "my brother").¹⁵⁹ In the Arab world, Turkey's pivot to the Middle East sparked growing interest among intellectuals while its cultural influence rapidly grew among the masses.¹⁶⁰ The PKK was in decline and forced out of its sanctuaries alongside Turkey's southeastern border.¹⁶¹ The attempt to moderate Kurdish politics by luring them into the political space—the so-called peace process—seemed to be working.¹⁶²

In reality, however, the post-Iraq War environment was already taking a toll on Turkey's relations with the West. These frictions first came to the fore in Turkish-Israeli relations.¹⁶³ The wave of anti-Americanism that rose with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Israel's 2008 war in Gaza made it increasingly difficult for an Islamist party like AKP to defend ties with Israel to its voters at home. Another factor that eroded relations was the decline of military tutelage. The crux of Turkish-Israeli relations was shared strategic interests.¹⁶⁴ When AKP moved to purge Turkey's secular generals, it eliminated both the most powerful constituency for Turkish-Israeli security cooperation and the last bulwark against its pivot to religious populism.¹⁶⁵ Secular public opinion turned against the West as well when the United States, Europe,

and Israel showed early support for the Islamists over the seculars. The rising wave of reactionary nationalism and a paranoia about disintegration came to be known as the “Sevres Syndrome,” after the post–World War I treaty that partitioned Turkey.¹⁶⁶

Factors like the personalities and opposing ideological agendas of leaders like Erdogan and Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu, the rise of ethno-religious nationalism in both Israel and Turkey, and the polarization of the Israeli and Turkish publics also helped to degrade Turkish-Israeli relations. Crises like Erdogan’s “one-minute” polemic with Israeli premier Shimon Peres at the 2009 World Economic Forum, Ankara’s increased engagement with high-level Hamas leaders, and the raid of the Gaza flotilla (“Mavi Marmara”) the same year further contributed to a climate of distrust.¹⁶⁷

More than anything, however, Israel and Turkey disagreed over their strategic landscape: where Turkey saw opportunities, Israel saw threats.¹⁶⁸ “Zero problems with Turkey’s neighbors is tantamount to serious problems with Israel,” wrote Oded Eran, senior fellow at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies and former ambassador to the EU. “It entailed tolerance of Iran’s nuclear effort, cooperation with the pre-Arab spring Assad regime, and support for Hamas.”¹⁶⁹

For Turkey, the post–Cold War world was full of both promise and peril. Turkey had the opportunity to establish itself as a regional power by expanding its political, economic, and cultural influence in its periphery, but Ankara had to do so in a turbulent strategic environment that lacked the bipolar Cold War order. Complex conflict dynamics around ethnic, religious, and sectarian affiliations had replaced the Cold War’s relatively stable fault lines. After decades of calculated ambivalence, Turkey was not merely entering the Middle East’s political games: it was going all in with strong hopes but a weak hand.

First, 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq threw Turkey off balance. When Ankara refused to allow U.S. troops into Turkey, Washington’s military planners ended up having to rely on Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani’s Kurdish Peshmerga.¹⁷⁰ The Peshmerga proved to be a strong fighting force in both the 2003 invasion and the later fight against the Islamic State.¹⁷¹ Their acquiescence was vital to keeping Iraq unitary, which maintained stability and warded off an all-out scramble for control over the country. Since 9/11, the United States has developed strong business interests in northern Iraq: the Kurds controlled large hydrocarbon reserves and American companies had a head start in accessing these fields, thanks to the political relationship between Washington and Erbil.¹⁷² Water was a similarly strategic resource, and the Kurds are a key actor in the Tigris-Euphrates basin. Unlike Arabs and Iranians, the Kurds are mostly secular—which makes them a more convenient partner—and they do not have dual loyalties to any other state in the

region.¹⁷³ Northern Iraq also has real estate value, particularly for Israel, as a forward base against both Iran and its Shia proxies in Iraq and Syria.¹⁷⁴ In other words, with Turkish-Israeli relations as fickle as ever, a Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq can offer Israel a more dependable space for virtual strategic depth.

For Turkey, the United States' and Israel's coziness with the Kurds was a betrayal of the first order. Both were seen as supporting Kurdish statehood in northern Iraq, which was achieved in all but name—complete with a flag, capital, cabinet, parliament, bureaucracy, and currency—after the 1991 Gulf War.¹⁷⁵ Along these lines, Israel's recent support for the Kurdish Regional Government's ill-fated referendum for independence has been particularly irksome to the Turks.¹⁷⁶

Failures in Syria Undermine Turkey's New Posture

In 2011, the Arab uprisings—particularly the civil war in Syria—entirely upended Turkey's plans.¹⁷⁷ For Turkey, the ideal solution was the swiftest: the worst outcome would be a pitched battle that would afford the PKK a haven in northern Syria in the same manner as the 1991 Gulf War had given it one in northern Iraq. Yet Ankara both misperceived Washington as willing to throw its full weight behind Assad's swift ouster and miscalculated that Syria's sectarian demographics would allow the Sunni majority to muster enough support for a smooth transition away from the minority Alawite-dominated Assad regime—a “naive and errant” reading of the regional dynamics.¹⁷⁸ In the minds of many in Ankara, the prospect of having an ideological fellow-traveler in Syria—indebted to, influenced by, and modeled after Erdogan—and the Turkish Islamists' own ideological fancies may well have added allure to the idea of Assad's ouster.¹⁷⁹ Yet similar aspirations had destroyed Turkey's relations with Egypt over its support for the latter's democratically elected and militarily ousted president, the Islamist Mohamed Morsi, and by extension, Turkey's ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who had supported General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi out of fear that the Muslim Brotherhood's success in Egypt would embolden their own Islamists and imperil their regimes.¹⁸⁰

Events in Syria, however, were worse than Turkey's worst expectations. The Syrian civil war has raged on for six years at the time of this writing. Not only did Turkey's support for the Free Syrian Army and its efforts to remove the Assad regime from power backfire, but they twice brought Turkey to the brink of war: after a Syrian surface-to-air missile downed a Turkish F-4 reconnaissance aircraft in 2012, and when a Turkish F-16 downed a Russian Su-24 fighter jet in 2015.¹⁸¹ The country's Syria policy reverberated in other areas as well. Turkey received more than 3.5 million refugees from Syria and Iraq at a cost of more than \$25 billion, which became a focal point of controversy.¹⁸²

Further, the power vacuum gave the PKK a new base of power in both Syria and Iraq. The PKK's fight against the Islamic State won it sympathy abroad and increased the pressure that Erdogan faced at home, particularly from Turkey's Kurds, to cast his lot with Turkey's longtime nemesis against the scourge of radical jihadists.¹⁸³ When Erdogan balked, the

Kurds turned against him and almost managed to dethrone him in the June 2015 general elections.¹⁸⁴ Seeing that the Kurds' ascendant power posed a threat to his ambitions, Erdogan walked away from the much-touted peace talks with the PKK, and the PKK responded with a renewed offensive, this time not only in Kurdish-majority Southeast but also in



TURKISH SOLDIERS FROM THE 1ST BORDER REGIMENT COMMAND RUN THROUGH ALERT DRILLS AT A MILITARY OUTPOST ON THE TURKEY/SYRIA BORDER ON MARCH 2, 2017 IN KILIS, TURKEY. THE MILITARY EXERCISES WERE HELD TO DISPLAY THE NEW BORDER WALL AND NEW SECURITY MEASURES SUCH AS THERMAL SCANNING AND PATROLS BY THE NEW TACTICAL ARMoured RECONNAISSANCE VEHICLES (KOBRA-2) THAT ARE BEING USED TO TIGHTEN TURKEY'S BORDER. THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED THIS WEEK THAT MORE THAN HALF OF THE 511-KILOMETER WALL HAS BEEN COMPLETED. SOURCE: CHRIS MCGRATH/GETTY IMAGES.

metropolises like Istanbul and Ankara.¹⁸⁵ The Islamic State also seized on the moment with a wave of deadly attacks targeting a popular nightclub and the international airport in Istanbul, a peace rally in Ankara, and a gathering of Kurdish activists in Sanliurfa.¹⁸⁶

To contain the dual threat from the PKK and the Islamic State, Turkey sank even deeper into the Syrian quagmire. Turkey's 2016 incursion into northern Syria—Operation Euphrates Shield—had dual objectives. First, it aimed to prevent the formation of a contiguous Kurdish enclave alongside the Turkish-Syrian border. The area in question encompassed the Kurdish-held Afrin district in the east and the western districts of Kobani, Tal Abyad, Qamishli, and al-Hasakeh controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which Ankara considers the PKK's Syrian affiliate. Second, it intended to weaken the Islamic State by pushing it farther away from the Turkish border and cutting its supply routes from Turkey.¹⁸⁷ It is worth noting that it was widely debated at the time whether Ankara had a belated awakening or whether it was simply using the fight against the Islamic State as an alibi for its ambitions against the Kurds.¹⁸⁸ Turkey had been criticized, perhaps unfairly, for its inaction against the flow of foreign jihadists into Syria and the Islamic State networks operating within its borders.

With the Assad regime's survival looking increasingly certain, Ankara made a U-turn and started courting Tehran, Baghdad, and Moscow to cordon off the Kurdish threat.¹⁸⁹ A perfect example of this volte-face is the dramatic change in Ankara's attitude toward Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Regional Government. Ankara and the Kurdish Regional Government used to be such close allies that Iraq once had to lodge a request for arbitration with the International Chamber of Commerce against Turkey and its state-owned pipeline company, BOTAS, for its energy business with Erbil.¹⁹⁰ Now, with the Kurds vying for independence from Iraq, Turkey has changed from being Barzani's worst-enemy-turned-best-friend back to being his worst enemy.

In retrospect, the opening round of Ankara's gambit seems to have failed spectacularly.¹⁹¹ To quote a Turkish proverb, Ankara went to Damietta for rice and lost the bulgur at home—the further its ambitions went, the worse it failed. Turkey's foreign policy has since devolved into a “precious loneliness.”¹⁹² With the sole exception of Qatar, which itself is under political embargo from other GCC countries, Turkey has few states to count as its allies.¹⁹³ Once lauded as the living proof that Islam and democracy could coexist, Turkey is now steadily descending into a religious authoritarianism.¹⁹⁴ The military is back with a vengeance, this time not under militantly secular generals but under a group whose Eurasianist, ethno-nationalist worldview aligns with Erdogan's anti-Western rhetoric.¹⁹⁵ The once-booming economy is going through tough times.¹⁹⁶ The hopes for bringing an end to the decades-long fight with the PKK are shattered. The country once celebrated for mending fences with its neighbors, playing peacemaker in the Middle East, and carrying the mantle of civilizational dialogue on the world stage is now little more than a memory.

This is not to say that the fault was in Ankara's stars. All other things being equal, Ankara's Islamists probably would have sought to break with the West to some extent. Without Turkey's changing security interests and a rapidly evolving strategic landscape, however, Turkey's foreign policy could not have shifted as dramatically as it did.

Policy Recommendations

Given the shifting sands of the Middle East's strategic landscape, the prospects seem bleak for any meaningful cooperation in the near future. That said, recognizing that Turkey's neo-Ottomanist turn was in large part a poor attempt to adapt to its evolving security interests in a changing threat environment reveals that a path for collaboration, albeit narrow, still exists.¹⁹⁷ Turkey's gross mistake was to abandon its pro-status-quo policy in favor of a revisionist posture that was naïve at best and reckless at worst.¹⁹⁸ As both Imran Demir and Burak Kadercan have observed, what led Turkey astray was a sunk-cost fallacy: Turkey's Islamists got drunk on their own success and gambled away their foreign policy fortune.¹⁹⁹ The silver lining to Turkey's woes is that Ankara might be finally humbled: if its U-turn in Syria and recent rapprochements with Iran and Russia are any indication, Ankara is open to writing off its sunk costs.

If security is the overarching rationale in Ankara's foreign policy, whatever cooperation emerges in the near future will be around issues that Ankara considers indispensable for its national security. First, stemming the rise of the Kurds, and by extension thwarting an independent Kurdistan anywhere along its Syrian border, whether in Syria or Iraq, is a crucial objective for Turkish foreign policy. It is perhaps the sole objective on which every regional actor—except Israel—can agree.²⁰⁰ Turkey is vehemently opposed to any change in territorial borders in the Middle East. This is not only because Turkey fears that the outcome of such a development would be Kurdish statehood—which it considers a fundamental threat to its national security—but also because Turkey has deep-rooted territorial disputes with Syria over the status of Hatay province, and with Iraq over Mosul and Kirkuk. From Ankara's perspective, both questions are resolved under law: Hatay belongs in Turkey per the 1939 Alexandretta plebiscite whereby the province decided to join Turkey, and Mosul and Kirkuk belong in Iraq per the 1926 Treaty of Ankara, which ceded them to Iraq. This position, however, does not mean that the issues have been entirely resolved on either side of the border: Syria still does not formally recognize Turkey's border as including the Hatay province, and a sizable faction of Turkish nationalists continue to think of Mosul and Kirkuk as Turkish territories. Turkey argues that the 1926 Treaty of Ankara is conditional upon the continued territorial integrity of Iraq. Should Iraq dissolve, or the Kurds secede, Ankara would face strong popular pressure to exercise its perceived rights to guarantorship over Mosul and Kirkuk.²⁰¹ Such a scenario would not only leave Turkey facing intense opposition from both the West and the region, but could provoke a three-way scramble for Iraq between Shia, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds.

A second area of cooperation would be ensuring an orderly transition in Syria. As observed earlier, even Ankara is resigned to the fact that the Assad regime will remain in power for the foreseeable future. Even if an eventual transfer of power puts Assad out of office, such a change probably will be brokered behind the scenes, not forced on the battlefield. If Iran, Iraq, and Turkey can unite around their shared opposition to Kurdish independence, this convergence could unlock new possibilities in Syria. In this context, the Assad regime's recent signals that it will not tolerate a continued Kurdish presence in northern Syria are also noteworthy.²⁰² In the long run, however, the crucial variable will be how Israel—and by extension, the United States—would receive such maneuvers. The answer to that question depends on various external factors as well, from the fate of the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015)²⁰³ to the growing competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.²⁰⁴

In this regard, it is misleading to read too much into Turkey's realignment with Russia and its regional proxies, Iran and Syria. Contrary to popular opinion, Turkey's pivot to the Russian sphere stems more from necessity than choice.²⁰⁵ With its relations with both the United States and Europe at an all-time low, Turkey has nowhere else to turn but Russia.²⁰⁶ In reality, Turkey's policy objectives in Syria and Iraq remain fundamentally dissonant with Russia's grand strategy: Ankara is keenly aware that "Russia is not opposed to Kurdish political aspirations" but "remains largely silent about Russian policies it dislikes" since "the rapid deterioration of its ties with the West has exponentially increased its dependence on

Russia.”²⁰⁷

Indeed, the consternation over Turkey’s thawing relations with Russia seems to have been much ado about nothing. The S-400 missile deal, which greatly irked its Western allies, has since fizzled.²⁰⁸ After months of diplomacy, Turkey was not even able to get Russia to fully lift the ban it had placed on Turkish tomato imports.²⁰⁹ Even if the West’s longstanding fears of an “Axis of the Excluded” are to ever come true, such an alliance is not likely to form anytime soon—not because Turkey is solidly anchored in the West but because its strategic dissonance with Russia is no less profound.²¹⁰

Despite all the criticism it has faced in recent years over what the West has viewed as a lackluster response to the Islamic State threat, Turkey remains deeply committed to combating terrorism, both from the PKK and the Islamic State. Both groups pose a major threat to the country.²¹¹ Turkey’s success on both counts, however, will depend on deescalation in Syria. Ankara’s concerns over the PKK; the growing strength of its Syrian affiliate, the Popular Protection Units (YPG); and the implications of an autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq are all well grounded. In this context, the United States’ ongoing expectation that Turkey should cast its lot with the YPG is tone-deaf and woefully naive.²¹² Even Erdogan, who enjoys cultish popularity with his own base, almost met his downfall in June 2015 because of his audacious attempt at peace with the Kurds: in AKP’s strongholds in Central Anatolia and the Black Sea coast, the pro-nationalist MHP increased its votes by more than two million, presumably by appealing to ethno-religious nationalist voters disaffected by what they saw as AKP’s fraternizing with the archenemy, PKK.²¹³

Moreover, Turkey currently seems to be viewing the PKK as a more immediate threat than the Islamic State, for at least two reasons. First, the Islamic State is the object of an international response, whereas Turkey is fighting the PKK all by itself. Second, unlike the rest of the region, Turkey’s religious establishment remains ideationally opposed to radical jihadism. Turkey’s dominant religious networks are Sufi orders (tariqahs) like Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya, and Khalwatiyya.²¹⁴ Tariqahs are organized under sheikhs who claim descent from Sufi saints like Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani and Baha-ud-din Naqshband Bukhari.²¹⁵ Sufi saints are associated with different miracles, and their tombs-turned-shrines are considered places of worship—it is not uncommon for the faithful to pray for the intercession of these saints.²¹⁶ The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, to which the Islamic State adheres, considers the building of tombs and shrines a form of idolatry. Thus, the Islamic State executed dozens of Sufi sheikhs and demolished many iconic sites like the tomb of Jonah in Mosul and a shrine devoted to the revered seventh-century Muslim Uwais al-Qarani in Raqqa. These acts have drawn the opprobrium of Turkey’s prominent tariqah sheikhs.²¹⁷ A case in point is Naqshbandi sheikh and popular televangelist Ahmet Mahmut Unlu. In July 2015, Unlu assailed the Islamic State from his column at Islamist daily *Vahdet*, calling the militants “dogs of Hell” and issued an edict for their execution. “If you run across them, slaughter them,” wrote Unlu. “Those who kill them and those who are killed by them will be eternally blessed as martyrs.”²¹⁸ As such, Turkish officials argue, the relative number of Turks joining the Islamic State has remained much less in

comparison to countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. Indeed, this is an area where Turkey's contribution could be extremely valuable—anti-Islamic State clerics and their transnational networks could be a potent tool to mobilize in countering violent extremism.

A third strategy of cooperation should be to make progress where progress can be made. One area where cooperation is at a premium is the refugee crisis. Turkey has become an unsung hero of the refugee crisis, receiving more than 3.5 million refugees—4.4 percent of the population of the country—in the space of a few years, on whom it has spent more than \$25 billion. No country can tackle such a crisis on its own, and the international community's response has been less than praiseworthy. Without a robust and comprehensive strategy for repatriation, resettlement, integration, and rehabilitation, refugee-hosting countries will be left to bear the political, economic, and social costs of their service to their international community, which would be neither fair nor feasible.²¹⁹ Failing in this task will also add to the risks of radicalization and extremism. Even if the Syrian civil war eventually winds down, it will be decades until the region fully returns to normal. Moreover, Turkey is not the only country affected by this crisis: Jordan and Lebanon are also among the world's top refugee-hosting countries.²²⁰ In Jordan and Lebanon, refugees make up more than a quarter of the population. A tripartite regional dialogue bringing these countries together on the shared issue of refugees can also pave the path to diplomatic engagement in other, more difficult areas.

Of course, all of these are temporary solutions. The key to unlocking the stalemate is a rapprochement in Turkish-Israeli relations—and, by extension, in Turkish-American relations. So long as the three countries continue to have divergent visions on the Middle East's strategic landscape, the situation will generate more problems than solutions. With Washington growing increasingly aggressive on Iran and supportive of Iran's regional rivals—namely, Saudi Arabia and its allies—Turkey once again faces the risk of falling on the wrong side of history, as it so often did over the past decade. The good news is that there are many crucial areas, particularly in the security sector, where history offers a repertoire of cooperative steps that could be reproduced for slow but steady gains. Both Israel and Turkey need each other and none of their alternatives—be it an Israel-backed Kurdistan in northern Iraq or a Turkish pivot toward the Russia-Iran axis—is as mutually beneficial as mending the fences. The bad news is that the problems have deep roots and require time to resolve. The personal relationship between Netanyahu and Erdogan is damaged beyond repair, and yet neither leader seems likely to be going away anytime soon. With Israel's growing relations with Greece and Cyprus, the strategic dissonance is starting to expand beyond the Middle East.²²¹ If the plans for a Greece-Cyprus-Israel pipeline materialize without some sort of rapport with the Turks, Ankara is likely to view this as a repeat offense—after Israel's support for Kurdish statehood—which harms the chances of both a Turkish-Israeli rapprochement and a lasting peace in Cyprus.²²² Meanwhile, the United States, whose diplomatic heft would probably be required for Israel and Turkey to mend relations, seems to have neither the interest nor the inclination for such grand schemes under the administration of

Donald Trump. Indeed, Erdogan seems to have run out of sympathy in Washington.²²³ Even among policy experts familiar with Turkey, the rising sentiment is that Turkey is “an ally, not a partner” and that it is “time to re-evaluate [the United States’] relationship to Turkey.”²²⁴

What those wishing to cut Turkey loose fail to appreciate is that Turkey’s trials go beyond a single man.²²⁵ Turkey always had a deep reservoir of anti-Americanism, and troubles will persist so long as two crucial issues remain unresolved: Fethullah Gulen’s continued residence in the United States and American support for Kurdish militants.²²⁶ In such a context, one might wonder if there is anything left to salvage from the alliance between the United States and Turkey. This argument is simplistic: it “either overestimates the ease of finding substitutes for Turkey or underestimates the risk that will emanate from a breakup.”²²⁷ As former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis recently wrote, none of what is needed to save the U.S.-Turkish alliance is easy or cost-free, but it would be an enormous geopolitical mistake to allow Turkey to drift away from the United States, Europe, and NATO.²²⁸ The overarching security objective for regional stability is the preservation of the status quo. For Turkey to make a positive contribution to that objective, it must first return to its own status quo, which is a functional if imperfect alliance with the United States and Israel.

Conclusion

An effort to engage Turkey in regional security cooperation must start with the premise that there is a hierarchy to Turkey’s issues. Security comes first; trade, influence, and identity matter to a lesser degree. Despite the talk of a profound shift in Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan’s AKP government—the neo-Ottomanist turn—Turkey’s policy positions on these security issues are marked by continuity, not change. Three systemic shifts—the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the post-9/11 order, and the 2011 Arab uprisings—caught Turkey in a perfect storm. Without the Soviet threat, its Cold War anchor, the dissonance between Turkey’s threat perceptions and the grand strategy of its Western allies worsened. The post-9/11 order, and particularly the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, brought the Turkish public’s nascent anti-Americanism to the surface and strained Turkey’s relations with the West. Finally, the Arab uprisings created regional instabilities that not only upended Turkey’s foreign policy strategy but also added to its domestic troubles.

The security-oriented rationale driving Turkish foreign policy might actually be a blessing in disguise. Reigning supreme in Turkey’s foreign policy thinking are dual threats: Kurdish secessionism and radical jihadism. Facing growing threats and seeing its grand ambitions unraveling, Ankara is finally intent on abandoning its revisionist foreign policy for something resembling its traditional pro-status-quo posture. This is particularly the case with regard to changes in territorial reorganization, whether through intrastate partition or interstate war. Despite the tense diplomatic relations

in the region, there are narrow issue-areas where shared problems can support a joint push toward solutions. One such area is the refugee crisis: tripartite regional dialogue bringing Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon together on this topic may lead to diplomatic engagement in other, more difficult areas. In the long run, however, Turkey can contribute to regional stability only if its own politics are stable. This depends strongly on the trajectory of Turkey's relations with Israel and the United States. For all the tough rhetoric coming from their leaders, Turkey and Israel have no better option than to cooperate with one another, particularly in defense and security. Even though their differences are too deep to resolve overnight, the main objective should be laying the groundwork for Turkey's rapprochement first with Israel and then with the United States.

Notes

1. Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 138–39.
2. This posture was known as the Inonu Doctrine. See Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 32–33.
3. See Dov Friedman, *The Turkish Model: History of a Misleading Idea* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2015); and F. Stephen Larrabee and Ian O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2003), 130–33.
4. Hasret Dikici Bilgin, "Foreign Policy Orientation of Turkey's Pro-Islamist Parties: A Comparative Study of the AKP and Refah," *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 3 (2008): 407–21; and Galip Dalay and Dov Friedman, "The AK Party and the Evolution of Turkish Political Islam's Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 2 (2013): 123–39.
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6. See Philip Robins, "Turkish Foreign Policy since 2002: Between a 'Post-Islamist' Government and a Kemalist State," *International Affairs* 83, no. 2 (2007): 289–304; Ayşegül Sever, "The Compliant Ally? Turkey and the West in the Middle East, 1954–58," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (1998): 73–90; and Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 33–36.
7. Ahmet Sözen, "A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 1 (2010): 103–123.
8. Marcie J. Patton, "AKP Reform Fatigue in Turkey: What Has Happened to the EU Process?" *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 339–58.
9. Özge Yaka, "Why Not EU? Dynamics of the Changing Turkish Attitudes towards EU Membership," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 149–70; and Gözde Yilmaz, "From Europeanization to De-Europeanization: The Europeanization Process of Turkey in 1999–2014," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 86–100.

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