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The Roots of Turkish Conduct:

Understanding the Evolution of Turkish Policy
in the Middle East

Amb. Eric S. Edelman, Ph.D.

Svante E. Cornell, Ph.D.

Aaron Lobel, Ph.D.

Michael Makovsky, Ph.D.

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Principal Investigators

Ambassador Eric Edelman

Former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey; Co-chair, Bipartisan Policy Center Turkey Initiative

Svante Cornell

Research Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program

Aaron Lobel

Founder and President, America Abroad Media

Michael Makovsky

Former Foreign Policy Director, Bipartisan Policy Center; CEO, JINSA

Foreign Policy Project Staff

Blaise Misztal

Acting Director

Ashton Kunkle

Program Assistant

Jessica Michek

Research Assistant

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Executive Summary

Amid recent upheaval in the Middle East, American policymakers have often turned to Turkey as an important partner that shared many U.S. interests. This perception of Turkey is based primarily on history. For the half-century of the Cold War, and for a decade afterward, Turkey was a stalwart U.S. ally. Policymakers on both sides of the aisle continue to treat it as such. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the George W. Bush administration accorded significant importance to Turkey as a “moderate Muslim” country. President Barack Obama has courted and developed a closer relationship with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan than perhaps any American president has with a Turkish leader.

More recently, however, Turkey became far less static and much more complex and unpredictable than many American observers and policymakers appreciate. Turkish foreign policy—in particular toward the Middle East—has endured a broad, historic shift during Prime Minister Erdoğan’s decade-long tenure. This fundamental reorientation of Turkey’s worldview has been difficult to detect, because it has been overshadowed by rapid policy swerves that, on the surface, seem hard to reconcile within a unitary framework. But it is precisely this volatility, combined with Turkey’s importance for the Middle East, that makes understanding the roots of Turkish conduct vital, not only for a realistic U.S. approach toward Turkey but also for U.S. policy toward the entire region.

Since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk helped found the Turkish republic 90 years ago out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey generally oriented its foreign policy toward the West. A secular state with an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population, Turkey sought to be considered part of that more modern, liberal, and secular grouping of nations. At the same time, it tried to avoid becoming embroiled in Middle Eastern conflicts as, according to Kemalist historiography, it was the factionalism and ungovernability of that area that doomed the Ottomans. This approach to the world remained constant throughout the Cold War, when Turkey became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and for some time thereafter. Indeed, in the 1990s, Turkey developed particularly close relations with the Jewish state of Israel.

The ascent to power in 2002 of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), however, marked a break from the traditional tenets of Turkish foreign policy. For its first three years in power, the AKP government, led by Prime Minister Erdoğan, focused on internal reform and European integration. But, during this time, it also began laying the groundwork for an activist policy in the Middle East. Although foreshadowed during the fleeting moments when previous Islamic parties held power, the AKP’s pursuit of interaction with regimes shunned by the West departed significantly from the policies espoused by the Kemalist establishment.¹ Initially, this activism was cautious, at least according to the AKP’s

narrative. Turkey's leaders touted its regional outreach as a boon for its traditional Western partners and positioned themselves as a bridge between East and West. Ankara, the argument went, could talk to regimes the West could not or would not engage with—and could influence them toward greater tolerance and democracy.

But, by 2007, the AKP government had soured on Europe and consolidated its position at home, while focusing much more on the Middle East. Led by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's foreign policy advisor and, since 2009, foreign minister, the AKP reoriented Turkish foreign policy away from the West. Instead, the expansion of Turkey's role and influence among Muslim and Middle Eastern nations became the centerpiece of its foreign policy. This engagement with the Middle East has been dizzying, marked by several policy swings.

From 2007 to 2011, Turkish foreign policy was driven by Davutoğlu's strategy, known as "zero problems with neighbors." It involved reaching out to numerous Shi'a and Sunni Islamic regimes that were shunned by the West—from Syria and Iran to Sudan and Hamas—as well as neighbors such as Iraqi Kurdistan and, more abortively, Armenia. Two elements of this policy were striking and differed from the pre-2007 period: first, rather than serving as a moderating force, the AKP government displayed a tendency to side with Islamist causes against the West and to espouse a form of pan-Islamic solidarity; and second, Ankara developed a profound and visible hostility toward Israel.

However, from 2011 until late 2013, as the Arab Awakening erupted and turned into a Sunni Islamist struggle for power—successfully, at first, in Egypt and Tunisia, less so in Syria—Turkish policies shifted. Although its hostility toward Israel continued, if anything escalating, Turkey shifted away from pan-Islamism and toward a distinctly sectarian, pro-Sunni approach, centered on support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates across the region. This represented a further break with traditional Turkish foreign policy. For nearly a century prior to this Turkey had eschewed overt intervention in the domestic affairs of Middle Eastern countries. This new activism was most visible in Ankara's regime-change policy in Syria, but equally present in its involvement in Egyptian affairs between 2011 and 2013.

These individual twists and turns in Turkish foreign policy were shaped by a number of factors, including the AKP's domestic consolidation of power; the weakening of the Turkish military and judiciary; the European Union's reluctance to embrace Turkey; the Iraq war; the rebellions in Egypt, Syria, and Libya; and Erdoğan's often erratic and prickly personality. But despite the pendulum swings in its conduct, there is an underlying consistency to Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP. The embrace of the Middle East and the pursuit of an active role for Turkey in the region represents a historic shift. But neither the direction nor the magnitude of this reorientation can be adequately accounted for by the various constraints, opportunities, and unforeseen events Turkey has faced over the last decade—or even by Prime Minister Erdoğan's temperament.

Indeed, it is the AKP's religious ideology that best explains the substantive basis for the change in Turkish foreign policy. This ideology has been the least acknowledged and most

underestimated factor in expert analysis and policy discussion of Turkey, not least because Turkish leaders have vigorously denied its role in their decision-making. Yet it seems to be the most important element explaining Turkish foreign policy, providing a vision, a set of goals, and an underlying motivation to Prime Minister Erdoğan's actions and rhetoric. Always present, not always visible, Islamist ideology has become an increasingly important driver of Turkish policy as the AKP consolidated power over the years.

The AKP's ideological underpinnings trace back to the Milli Görüş movement of Turkish political Islam of the 1960s. It has two major ideological elements: one is historical nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire; the second is the more modern inspiration drawn from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Ottoman nostalgia makes the Turkish Islamist movement Sunni orthodox to its core. It led to its opposition to Turkey's European orientation and to its Westernization. In addition, while the AKP variety of Turkish Islamism is certainly more moderate than the Muslim Brotherhood's—in fact, the AKP only emerged when the reformers split from the Milli Görüş movement—AKP leaders share several of the Brotherhood's key tenets. It is from the Brotherhood and its leading thinkers that it draws its pan-Islamic and anti-colonial, as well as strongly anti-Zionist and often outright anti-Semitic, worldview.

Moreover, the Brotherhood influenced the Turkish Islamists' views of Iran. Thus, the Sunni orthodox nature of the Milli Görüş movement was mitigated by admiration, shared with the Brotherhood, for the Islamic revolution engineered by Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this regard, Turkish Islamists are far closer to the Brotherhood's pan-Islamism than to the virulently anti-Shi'a Salafis of the Gulf.

Yet the ideological origins of the AKP did not figure prominently in its rise to power. Indeed, the AKP rejected any description of itself as Islamist. Instead, it cast itself in the tradition of European Christian Democratic parties—as a conservative democratic party that, while influenced by its members' Islamic faith, would not undermine the secularism of the Turkish state. This disavowal of its Islamist heritage stemmed in part from the AKP's need to defend itself against Turkey's secularist institutions. The Constitutional Court, for example, had previously banned the AKP's predecessors—the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party—and had attempted to outlaw the AKP just ten days before the 2002 general elections that would bring the AKP to power.

Following its initial electoral victory, the AKP's hold on government was still tenuous and could easily be threatened by Turkey's secular establishment. Its ability to act according to its ideology was, therefore, somewhat constrained. Although it initiated tentative openings to the Middle East, during this period the AKP largely hewed to the foreign policy of its predecessors and, in fact, its embrace of Turkish candidacy for EU membership helped it win the grudging acquiescence of much of the secular elite. But as Erdoğan and the AKP consolidated power over the years, they were free to accord ideology a greater role in domestic and foreign policy. Indeed, no other factor can fully explain Ankara's behavior on the Iranian nuclear issue, its preference for Hamas over Fatah in intra-Palestinian politics, or its embrace of the Sudanese regime of Omar Al-Bashir.

Subsequently, the unexpected opportunity presented by the Arab Awakening buoyed—and to some extent shifted—the ideological nature of the AKP’s foreign policy. When the region was governed largely by secular, authoritarian regimes, the AKP’s ideological inclinations were expressed through its “zero problems with the neighbors” policy, based on romantic, pan-Islamic and Ottoman sentiments. This was in turn informed by the belief that Turkey’s Ottoman past provided it with a strategic depth in the region that previous governments had failed to utilize. However, the rise of Sunni movements—primarily the Brotherhood—to prominence across the region presented a historic opportunity for the AKP to support the very Sunni Islamist movements that were closest to its own worldview. While doing so put it at odds with Iran, most notably, it was a temptation that the AKP could not resist.

This study reached its conclusions after close examination of Turkish history, domestic policy, Turkey’s interactions with other nations, the actions and rhetoric of its leaders, and the pronouncements of Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, with the latter offering an intellectual framework for Turkish foreign policy. Specifically, these findings are based on case studies of Turkey’s relations with four countries/entities: Iran, Egypt, Syria, and Israel/Hamas/Palestinian Authority.

Turkey’s courting of Iran is a prime example of the AKP’s erstwhile pan-Islamic worldview, leading it to overlook a long history of geopolitical rivalry and divergences of interest. As Ankara tried to inject itself as a mediator in the diplomatic conflict over Iran’s nuclear program, it rapidly appeared to side with Iran in a form of Third Worldist solidarity against Western powers. Turkey’s support for the Iranian regime led it to keep silent as Tehran violently put down pro-democracy protests following its 2009 presidential election. The relationship soured, however, as Turkish and Iranian policies naturally diverged, and their leaders found themselves on different sides of the Syrian conflict, as well as on Iraq and other issues.

Ankara’s policy toward Syria reflects several elements coursing through its foreign policy at different times. Pan-Islamism coupled with a quest for a greater Turkish role in the Middle East led Prime Minister Erdoğan to embrace Bashir Al-Assad’s Alawite-dominated regime, ignoring international pleas to condemn and isolate Syria as a chief sponsor of terrorism and for its role in assassination of Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Assad’s brutal response to an initially modest protest against his regime in early 2011 made Ankara’s heretofore close relationship with Damascus increasingly untenable. Gradually, Erdoğan turned against Assad and fully embraced the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist elements of the violent opposition to Assad, at the expense of all other forces in the Syrian opposition and at the expense of ignoring the concerns of Syria’s minorities.

Turkey’s approach to intra-Palestinian politics and growing hostility to Israel clearly reveals the impact of the AKP’s religious ideology on its policy. Ankara early on showed its preferences for Hamas—the Muslim Brotherhood’s Palestinian affiliate—over Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, in spite of the latter being the internationally recognized representative of the Palestinians. Despite the fact that Hamas was considered a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States, the AKP displayed a clear

preoccupation with the group—most notably with its warm outreach to Hamas after the group’s 2006 electoral success as well as with a frenzied reaction to both the 2008 war in Gaza and the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident.

Prime Minister Erdoğan’s hostility to Israel, on the other hand, grew in direct proportion to the AKP’s consolidation of power, which neutralized the main supporter of Turkey’s alignment with the Jewish state: the military. With time, this hostility took on an increasingly overt anti-Semitic edge, as Erdoğan and his associates alleged world Jewry’s control over the international media and financial markets, as well as a Jewish conspiracy to undermine Turkey’s rise, most recently during the 2013 Taksim Square protests.

Egypt is also a clear example of the role of ideology in Turkish foreign policy and perhaps the most clear-cut display of Turkey’s sectarian drift. Prime Minister Erdoğan’s vigorous intervention during the Egyptian revolution stood in marked contrast to his silence when the Iranian regime crushed the Green Revolution two years earlier. When the Brotherhood’s Muhammad Morsi subsequently took power, Turkey invested heavily, politically as well as financially, in building a strategic partnership with Egypt. Conversely, Ankara’s hostile reaction to Morsi’s ouster only served to isolate Turkey, putting it at odds even with the Arab regimes that joined its support for the Syrian opposition.

The fluctuations in Turkish policy, and its disavowal of traditional Turkish non-involvement in the Middle East, have not served the country well. Its initial outreach to neighbors was generally a failure. When Ankara sought to use the political capital it had been accruing in Damascus, it discovered that it in fact had no leverage with Assad. Instead, “zero problems” was quickly replaced with acrimony in Armenia, Syria, and Iran.

The more sectarian approach Turkey adopted next is not faring much better. In spite of its efforts at regime change in Syria, the Assad regime is gaining, rather than losing, ground. Meanwhile, the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Ankara’s response to it, has further diminished Turkey’s standing in the region. And in the aftermath of the government’s crackdown on the Taksim protests, Turkey’s relations with Europe are chilly at best, with hopes for European Union accession quickly vanishing.

Now, Turkey seems poised to swerve yet again. Recognizing the isolation that has resulted from its sectarian drift, Ankara appears to be reviving its “zero problems” approach. In the last months of 2013, Turkey has taken steps to mend fences with Iraq’s central government, reached out to Kurds in Syria, and tentatively moderated its rhetoric toward Egypt.

Making sense of this latest dizzying turn, the form it might take, and what future shifts might come in Turkish policy requires understanding the similarities, not just the differences, in Turkish conduct under the AKP. Ankara’s foreign policy has been driven by an overarching ambition for regional dominance, underlined by historical nostalgia and religious solidarity. The swerves in its policy, rather than demonstrating fickleness or discontinuity, are a reflection of the sectarian ambivalence of the AKP’s strain of political Islamism.

Turkey, however, has always remained one step behind quickly evolving events in the Middle East. Whether in backing NATO intervention in Libya or coming to terms with the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster in Egypt, Ankara's policies have been slow to catch up to regional dynamics. On the few occasions when Turkey sought to shape the direction of events, it quickly faced limitations to its influence. It could neither convince Assad to meet protesters' demands nor the Muslim Brotherhood to moderate its governing style, ultimately losing standing in both Syria and Egypt. As long as Turkish foreign policy remains reactive, it seems doomed to stay on the roller-coaster trajectory it has followed over the last decade. Comprehending the ideological underpinnings of Turkey's aspirations can help American policymakers better track the ebb and flow of Turkish policy and project its next swerve. It might also demonstrate that Turkey shares fewer common interests with the United States than many observers realize.

Introduction

In the past decade, Turkish foreign policy has gone through a considerable transformation. Where it had often been status-quo-oriented and reactive, it is now increasingly activist. Whereas Turkey was previously focused predominantly on its ties with Europe and the United States, it has now turned its attention primarily to the Muslim Middle East.

Such reorientation has been described as the end of the Kemalist era in Turkish foreign policy. This, combined with significant changes in Turkey's domestic affairs and political institutions, this has led observers to speak of a "second Turkish republic," in an explicit reference to de Gaulle reinvention of the French state and creation of the "French Fifth Republic."²

Indeed, the last decade—since the AKP's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected in November 2002—has meant a departure from a foreign policy that was well understood and relatively predictable. But a departure toward what destination? This is a subject of considerable controversy. When elected, the AKP simultaneously launched a broad package of reform toward harmonization with the European Union, as well as an incremental opening to the Middle East. Over time, the European vector of Turkish foreign policy receded, while Turkey became increasingly embroiled in the affairs of the Middle East.

Given the importance of Turkey to the United States, it is surprising that comparatively little research has been undertaken on understanding the sources and motivations of Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP—and how they have evolved with time. While regional experts have continuously debated the evolution of Turkish conduct, the issue only broke through into the general U.S. foreign policy debate as a result of two diplomatic crises in the spring of 2010.

First, Turkey inserted itself into the politics of the Iranian nuclear program, brokering a nuclear deal together with Brazil that the United States and its allies refused to follow and that was seen as taking the Iranian side in the controversy. Second, in June 2010, the Turkish government helped launch the "Ship to Gaza" flotilla—and reacted furiously to Israel's use of force to stop it. These back-to-back crises led to a debate over whether Turkey was leaving the West. But in 2011, Ankara agreed to the deployment of a radar, part of the NATO Missile Defense Shield, on its territory.³ Additionally, as protests that same year heralded the possible advent of democracy in the region, Turkey was, once again, touted as a model for the region. As a result, the debate gradually died away, only to return again in 2013. Once again, two crises forced Western policymakers to question Turkey's motives: first, mass protests against the AKP flared up in June and Prime Minister Erdoğan decided to crackdown on the protesters and blame foreign forces for the unrest; second, Turkey reacted harshly to the Egyptian military's ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in July.

Since the debate over the evolution of Turkish foreign policy began in earnest, it has included a number of factors that have been raised as explanations for the changes. These can roughly be summarized under four headings: (1) the normal evolution of a rising power, (2) Western alienation, (3) individual personalities, and (4) ideology.

The first hypothesis argues that much of Turkey's rising assertiveness can be ascribed to the country's growing economic and political clout. As a rising power, according to this theory, Turkey has come to define its interests independently and self-confidently—and not necessarily in alignment with Western interests. This is what some analysts have termed "Turkish Gaullism."⁴ Indeed, Turkey has undergone tremendous domestic change in the past decade. While the Islamic conservative movement has succeeded in overturning the secular establishment, an arguably more significant shift is Turkey's emergence as an economic power. Since 1990, Turkey's GDP has quadrupled, exports have grown by a factor of five, foreign direct investment has grown by a factor of 25, and the value of traded stocks has grown by a factor of 40. As the world's 16th-largest economy, it may be considered natural for Turkey to act with more self-confidence on the international scene, especially as larger, more developed economies have stumbled. The rediscovery of the Middle East, in this interpretation, is part and parcel of this pragmatic policy: Turkish exporters are looking for new markets, and hordes of businessmen regularly accompany Turkish leaders on their numerous visits to Middle Eastern states. Given the close ties between politics and business in the region, closer political ties provide Turkish businessmen with preferential treatment. In some places, such as Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq, the dynamic is inverted: the growing presence of Turkish businesses there after 2003 helped open the way for a political rapprochement with the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil.

A second hypothesis is that Western alienation is responsible for Turkey's drift toward the Middle East. In 2010, for example, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates cited the European Union's rejection of Turkey as an explanation for the country's policies on Iran and Israel.⁵ Indeed, while Turkey has traditionally sided with Western states in major foreign policy issues, this relationship was always based on reciprocity. But since Turkey began negotiating for EU accession in 2005, opposition to Turkish membership not only grew in Europe, but also was, for the first time, articulated in terms of Turkey's civilizational identity, questioning whether Turkey was even a European country at all. The overt opposition of French and German leaders to Turkish accession had a profound impact in Turkey. A large majority of Turks no longer believe that Turkey will join the European Union, and support for membership has similarly dwindled. In this context, the argument goes, it is natural for Turkey to seek options other than a single-minded focus on European integration and friends beyond the Western alliance.

In addition to Europe's alienation of Turkey, the United States is also blamed for failing to nurture bilateral ties. The Cold War laid the foundation for Turkey's integration into the West, but ever since it ended, the U.S.-Turkish relationship has lacked a compelling *raison d'être*. The Bush administration's Iraq policy deeply alienated the overwhelming majority of Turkey's population and leadership. Most Turks viewed the war, whether correctly or not, as

inadvertently contributing to the resurgence of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the mountains of northern Iraq and its renewed wave of violence in Turkey. From Turkey's perspective, the U.S. intervention emboldened Kurds in general, as it effectively created an independent Kurdish entity. Moreover, the United States prevented Turkey from intervening militarily in northern Iraq, as it had done in the past, thus enabling the PKK to restore its position there. As such, particularly given the economic crisis in the West and the contrasting growth in many emerging markets, it should come as no surprise that a stronger Turkey would seek to go its own way on some issues, or pay less attention to Western priorities.

A third explanation proffered for Turkey's conduct on the world stage is the dominance of its government by a single, forceful personality. Turkey's foreign-policy-making process has historically been bureaucratic and legalistic, with personality playing only a limited role. Under Prime Minister Erdoğan, however, this has changed: Turkish observers regularly report how decision-making is increasingly isolated to a duo consisting of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu, with some input from a close circle of advisors. This leaves the foreign ministry and other state institutions functioning simply as implementers of their ideas. Thus, many Turkish initiatives have been less than well prepared and top heavy—rather than balanced and supported by serious planning.

With so much power centered on one or two individuals, their personalities and priorities can have an outsized effect on policymaking. Thus, according to this hypothesis, the seemingly erratic swerves of Turkish foreign policy are a reflection of the increasing isolation and imperiousness of Prime Minister Erdoğan. His personal relationship with foreign leaders may likewise be an important explanation for his actions, affecting Turkish policy toward these countries. The most obvious examples are Erdoğan's personal falling outs with both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert over the 2008 Gaza war and Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad in 2011 as well as the decision to deploy the missile defense radar on Turkish territory only after a personal intervention by President Obama.

Fourth, ideological orientation could explain recent Turkish foreign policy. The AKP rejects both any definition of itself as "Islamist" and the notion that its foreign policy is in any way anti-Western. In a 2010 interview, President Abdullah Gül strongly denied that Turkey had turned its back to the West. Instead, he described his country as "now a big economic power that had embraced democracy, human rights and the free market. It had become a 'source of inspiration' in the region." He went on to declare that "the U.S. and Europe should welcome [Turkey's] growing engagement in the Middle East because it [is] promoting Western values in a region largely governed by authoritarian regimes."⁶

Determining the extent to which these factors—rising Turkish power, Western alienation, personality, and ideology—have influenced the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy over the last decade will require examining particular examples. To that end, this study will explore Turkey's approach to Syria, Iran, Israel and Palestine, and Egypt. These cases have witnessed some of the largest oscillations in Ankara's policies. A valid hypothesis will have

to explain not only why the AKP changed Turkey's traditional approach toward each of these countries, but also the subsequent changes in the AKP's policies.

This paper overviews Turkey's traditional policy toward the Middle East; provides a background to the origins of the AKP as a political movement; summarizes the AKP's decade in power in both the domestic and foreign policy areas; delves into the case studies of Syria, Iran, Israel and Palestine, and Egypt; and concludes with a comparative analysis of Turkish policy in these four cases.

The Turkish Republic and the Middle East

The Arab Middle East formed a large and key part of the Ottoman Empire, contributing to its religious legitimacy. But it ultimately became an important factor in the empire's collapse. Its successor, the Republic of Turkey—founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the aftermath of the First World War—long eschewed entanglement in the Middle East and looked to the West instead. That approach dominated Turkish foreign policy for 80 years, until the AKP took power in 2002.

The Ottoman Empire was born on the shores of the Black Sea in the early 14th century, initially expanding mainly into Eastern Europe. In 1517, upon conquering Egypt and after already having wrested control over Islam's holy cities from the Fatimid Caliphate, its Sultan claimed the title of Caliph—the ruler of the Islamic *ummah*, or community. While the empire lost its effective control over Egypt in the late-19th century, it maintained some semblance of rule over other Arab territories—notably Syria, Palestine, and parts of Arabia—until losing them in the First World War.

Out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire emerged the modern Republic of Turkey, created by Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the Turkish war of liberation against encroaching Western powers. Atatürk would rekindle the Westernizing energies unleashed by reformers in the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century, but in a much more revolutionary way: he did away with both the Sultanate and the Caliphate, abolishing the Ottoman's throne and remaking it into a Turkish republic. In place of a theocratic empire, Atatürk created a secular nation-state. His reforms, imposed top-down from the mid-1920s onward, were sweeping, including a change of both alphabet and language. Atatürk introduced the Latin alphabet and purged modern Turkish of many of the Arabic and Persian influences that formed Ottoman Turkish, distancing in a single stroke Turkey from the Middle East both linguistically and culturally. Instead, he aspired for Turkey to achieve the highest levels of what he termed "contemporary civilization," which he found to be present in the West, not the Middle East. Atatürk's was not the most thorough project of social engineering introduced in the 20th century, but it was certainly one of the longest lasting. It endured, surviving both fascism and communism—not least because of its relatively liberal and forward-looking character, certainly compared with its contemporaries.

Indeed, in the decades following the republic's founding, official Turkish historiography, intended to bolster the Kemalist vision, portrayed the Arabs as ungrateful imperial subjects who had revolted against the Caliph. Thus, mentally at least, Turkey moved on and moved away from the Middle East. The republican elite's mind-set followed suit for much of the

next 70 years. Avoiding entanglement in the Middle East became a cornerstone of modern Turkey's foreign policy, which focused entirely on cementing its ties to the West.

Turkey's disinterest in the Middle East did not, at first, mean isolation. The experience of empire had made republican Turkey wary of foreign policy adventurism in general, but especially toward the Middle East. But the Turkish foreign policy and national security establishment assumed that Turkish interests would be best served by a reactive rather than activist posture in Middle Eastern affairs. Thus, as early as 1937, Turkey signed the Saadabad Pact, a nonaggression treaty, with Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.⁷

After the Second World War, a new geostrategic dynamic emerged—the great power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union—that also engulfed Turkey. In 1945, Joseph Stalin, seeking to expand the Soviet Union's territory and sphere of influence, made claims on the Turkish straits and Turkey's eastern provinces. This threat thrust Turkey into the emerging Cold War. From 1946 until 1979, Turkey's foreign policy was exclusively dictated by the imperative of containing of communism.

Alarmed by Soviet expansionism, in 1947, U.S. President Harry Truman—in what marks, for some, the beginning of the Cold War—sent military and financial aid to Turkey and Greece and committed the United States to checking the spread of communism. Turkish leaders shared these concerns. They proved willing to relinquish control over the state and to move to a multiparty democracy to secure membership in NATO. This, in turn, was the rationale for ending one-party rule and paved the way for multiparty elections in 1950. Similarly, for the same purpose, Turkey's leaders willingly dispatched troops to Korea in 1950, at a time when many U.S. allies were reluctant to do so. Its relationship with the United States and its NATO membership rapidly formed the bedrock of Turkey's strategic posture.⁸

For the next three decades, Turkey's cultural, political, and strategic orientation toward the West governed its relationship with the Middle East. Turkey emerged as a key member of the network of alliances that were formed to counter the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East; not least because Turkey's border with Syria functioned as an extension of the Iron Curtain that divided Europe. In 1955, Turkey signed the Baghdad Pact (later renamed the Central Treaty Organization, CENTO) together with Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. Tellingly, CENTO had the chief goal of containing communism. Thus, the Middle East, as seen from Ankara, was reduced mainly to a security concern, a playground for foreign intrigue.

Consequently, Turkish officials and diplomats knew relatively little about the Middle East. While maintaining cordial relations with many regional states, they did not take a deep interest in their affairs. The number of Turkish diplomats who learned Arabic or Persian remained low, in part because doing so attracted suspicions of Islamic leanings, which were no boon to any official's career in an avowedly secular state. Nor did many Turkish diplomats actively seek postings to Middle Eastern capitals. It was the Western capitals—particularly Washington, London, and Paris—that were considered plum postings. Turkey's few attempts at engagement in the region, such as seeking support among Arab states for

its position on the Cyprus dispute, usually failed miserably. Fealty to the Non-Aligned Movement, of which Cyprus was a member, seemed to trump any potential benefits regional states could have gained from solidarity with Turkey. This only further exacerbated Turkey's distance from the Middle East.⁹

By the 1980s, security concerns, primarily the Kurdish issue, compelled Turkey to interact more closely with its immediate neighbors. Tensions with Turkey's Kurdish population had worsened following the 1980 military coup, giving rise to an armed struggle with Kurdistan's PKK. The insurgency forced Turkey to deal with its three neighbors that also contained Kurdish populations: Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Damascus, and potentially Tehran, lent the PKK support, setting the stage for increasingly hostile relations with Ankara. Turkey was more successful in forging an agreement with Iraq's Saddam Hussein. Having to commit all of its forces to the war with Iran, Baghdad was unable to exert authority in its restive, Kurdish-populated northern provinces and was therefore willing to allow Turkey to make regular incursions into Iraqi territory in pursuit of the PKK.¹⁰ This in turn dragged Turkey deep into intra-Kurdish politics. It forged ties with Iraqi Kurdish factions rivaling the PKK—Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—ties that fluctuated wildly over time, as did the relations between these Kurdish groups. By the early 1990s, however, both Barzani and Talabani traveled abroad on Turkish-issued passports.

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered the strategic environment facing Turkey and challenged its long-standing aversion to Middle Eastern engagement. Almost immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait forced Ankara to reconsider its stance toward the region. With its NATO ally seeking international support for an operation to liberate Kuwait, Turkey had to decide whether to join the U.S. coalition. The resulting internal debate revealed deep divisions within Turkey's elite. The military establishment adamantly counseled against joining a military attack on Turkey's immediate neighbor; much of both elite and public opinion agreed. Yet President Turgut Özal, a committed pro-U.S. politician, saw an opportunity to help Turkey find a new role in the post-Cold War world and strongly supported joining the international war effort. The confrontation resulted in the resignation of Chief of General Staff Necip Torumtay and a victory for Özal.

Although Özal died in 1993, the foreign policy establishment—chiefly the General Staff and the high ranks of the foreign ministry—soon came to embrace his vision of Turkey as a force in the Middle East, closely coordinated with the United States.

One manifestation of this growing willingness throughout the 1990s to engage with the Middle East, in conjunction with the United States, was Turkey's alignment with Israel. Although Turkey had recognized Israel in 1949 and maintained diplomatic relations with it, the relationship was relatively cold until the late 1980s. One reason for this was the Turkish public's concern with the fate of the Palestinians. Another reason was that Ankara was not eager to antagonize the Arab states who supported Turkey on the Cyprus issue. With Özal's opening to the region—and the Oslo peace process—better relations with Israel suddenly

became possible. Turkey and Israel were also brought closer by mutual distrust for the Arab states and by warm historical feelings resulting from the Ottoman decision to accept Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century.

Engagement with Israel proved attractive to Ankara for several reasons. First, Turkey's main regional antagonist at the time was Syria, which harbored and supported the PKK. The alignment with Israel was in many ways a joint effort to squeeze Syria. Moreover, Turkey sought to benefit from the powerful pro-Israel lobby in the United States in order to counterbalance the Armenian and other lobbies that undermined Turkey's position in the U.S. Congress. Finally, the Turkish military—stung by Western arms embargoes in the past—was interested in military procurement from Israel and in deepening intelligence cooperation. Thus, in 1996, three major agreements were signed between Turkey and Israel on military cooperation, defense industry ties, and free trade. This relationship shook up the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is no coincidence that only two years later Turkey was able to coerce the Syrian leadership to end its support for the PKK and expel its leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

However, Turkey's major post-Cold War foreign policy initiative, its alignment with Israel notwithstanding, was toward the east, not the south.

The collapse of the Soviet Union sparked a fleeting Pan-Turkic euphoria. Leading Turkish politicians, motivated by a renewed sense of ethnic nationalism, envisioned Turkey at the head of a confederation of Turkic-speaking states that included former Soviet republics. That sudden impulse led nowhere, as it badly overestimated the decline of Russia's influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus and ignored the fact that consolidating sovereignty—not joining any new confederation—was the priority of the newly independent states. Moreover, the Turkish failure to prevent Armenia from annexing a sixth of Turkic Azerbaijan's territory in 1993 exposed the limits of Turkey's power, undermining its ambitions. That said, the episode is relevant in two ways: first, because it illustrates that in the 1990s, the Middle East still remained an afterthought for Turkish leaders; and second, because, in its irrationality, Turkey's attempts two decades ago to crown itself a leader of all Turkic states is eerily similar to the Middle Eastern euphoria that has gripped it more recently.

But the similarities stop there. The embrace of the Turkic world was motivated by pan-Turkic ethnic nationalism, while the more recent embrace of the Middle East has been motivated by Islamism. Thus, the ideological underpinnings of the two initiatives were diametrically opposed. Still, the pathology that doomed Turkey's previous regional engagement—the fact that its leadership ambitions outpaced both the receptiveness of others to its advances and its underlying economic and military power—also represents a challenge for its current policies.

Yet, during this post-Cold War period, even while experimenting with regional engagement, the Turkish political establishment remained committed to maintaining strong ties with the West. The only exception was the Islamist Welfare Party, led by Necmettin Erbakan, whose

ideological resistance to the West manifested itself in its antagonism toward the European Union. The Welfare Party strongly opposed Turkey's EU accession, including opposing on principle the Customs Union with the EU that Turkey joined in 1995. Erbakan, who also founded the Islamist movement Milli Görüş, went so far as to call Turkish EU membership "treason to our history, civilization, culture and sovereignty."¹¹ Turkish expert Alan Makovsky summarized Erbakan's stance as follows: he "criticized U.S. 'imperialism,' accused NATO of exploiting Turkey, condemned Turks who favor their state's integration with Western Europe as contemptible Westernizers, denounced Zionism and Jews, and urged that Turkey integrate with the Islamic world by establishing an 'Islamic NATO,' an Islamic Common Market, and an Islamic United Nations."¹²

Erbakan's views developed some traction among certain segments of the Turkish policy community. Benefiting from the country's growing mismanagement and corruption under the established elites, the Welfare Party gained power in 1996, forming a short-lived coalition that made Erbakan prime minister. During its time in power, the party's leading figures called for the introduction of sharia,¹³ among other demands, and pursued a foreign policy that sought to distance Turkey from the "imperialist" West.¹⁴ Yet, Erbakan failed to implement any of these revisionist goals during his brief tenure (1996–1997).¹⁵

That's because he was never able to control Turkey's foreign policy. Although he was prime minister, Erbakan presided over a coalition government, which forced him to hand key cabinet portfolios, including foreign affairs, defense, and interior, to the center-right True Path Party. This meant that, in practice, foreign policy continued to be formulated by the Kemalist establishment in cooperation with a Kemalist political party. As a result, he was unable to achieve the Welfare Party's two key foreign policy priorities: stopping or slowing the deepening Turkish-Israeli military relationship and revising or rescinding the Customs Union with the EU.

Whatever moves he did make in foreign policy, however, were congruent with his ideological profile. Erbakan ran a shadow foreign relations operation from his office, which was quite telling—not so much because of its rhetoric, but because of its content. While key Welfare officials toned down their criticism of the West and remained largely silent on Israel, Erbakan never traveled to a Western country as prime minister. Instead, his two foreign trips were both to Muslim countries. His symbolically important first foreign destination was Iran, on a trip that also included Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. A second trip took him to Egypt, Libya, and Nigeria.

The major foreign policy initiative of his premiership was the establishment of the D-8, a group of eight sizable and developing Muslim-majority nations. In Erbakan's vision, the D-8 would negotiate a new world order with the G-7 at a Yalta-style conference.

Erbakan, thus, did not actively work to undermine the Western direction of Turkey's foreign policy, something he would, in any case, have been unable to do. Instead, he focused on establishing an Islamic vector, consistent with his basic anti-Western worldview.¹⁶ This could be construed as pragmatism. But given the constraints on his government, the priority he

accorded to domestic transformation, and the powerful influence of a military that would soon help overthrow him, his foreign policy is perhaps best understood as pushing the envelope with an eye to the future while operating within the tight political constraints of his day.

Yet, Erbakan's year in office, with its limited, ineffective outreach to the Middle East and Muslim nations, foreshadowed a looming transformation in Turkish foreign policy. With the Cold War bipolar system unraveling, republican Turkey's detachment from the Middle East was proving unsustainable, not as a result of Erbakan's Islamist ideology penetrating the foreign policy establishment, but because of geostrategic realignments. With the U.S.-Soviet standoff no longer defining Turkish foreign policy or regional allegiances, Turkey began breaking from its previous policies of caution and non-involvement in Middle Eastern disputes. Even before the AKP came to power, short-lived coalition governments were exploring the ways in which Turkey would approach the Middle East in the new post-Cold War era. But these experiments were undertaken in coordination with or as a supplement to—not in the place of—Turkey's decades-long Western orientation.

Indeed, Kemalism's legacy continues to have repercussions for Turkish foreign policy, even today. First, the deliberate priority accorded to the West marked a mental distance from the Middle East that could not be easily reversed. Indeed, a broad consensus existed across the left-right divide of Turkish politics on this issue. Only Erbakan's Islamist movement diverged, opposing Turkey's Western orientation in favor of one focused on the Muslim world. Such views, however, were marginal in Turkish intellectual debate. Secondly, as a result, Turkey never invested in—and, therefore, systematically lacked the human resources necessary for—the sort of sustained diplomatic engagement needed to expand its influence in the region. At the time of the recent Libya war, for example, the entire Turkish Foreign Ministry had a total of seven fluent Arabic speakers; incidentally, the same number that the British Embassy in Tripoli had.¹⁷

This means that when Turkey—first in the 1990s and then again more purposefully under the AKP's leadership—began revisiting the tenets of its foreign policy, it lacked the intellectual tools and human capital to adequately understand the myriad of relationships within, across, and between Middle Eastern countries and groups that could affect Turkish policies. While it is possible to rapidly expand embassies, trade, foreign aid, and cultural diplomacy, as Turkey has done in the Middle East, it remains to be determined whether meaningful foreign engagement can be sustained without the type of human resources and expertise that can only be developed gradually and over time.

The Origins of the AKP

Although it was only founded in 2001, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) evolved from, and has its roots in, Turkey's political Islamic movement, dominated by the conservative Naqshbandiyya order and its derivative, the Milli Görüş organization.¹⁸ Created in the 1960s and 1970s, this movement expanded greatly under the military regime established after the 1980 coup. The military proved willing to tolerate, in the immediate post-coup period, a fusion of Turkish nationalism and Muslim identity as an antidote to Soviet-supported communism.¹⁹

The Worldview of the Milli Görüş Movement

The Milli Görüş movement, the backbone of political Islam in Turkey, developed a worldview closely connected to that of the Muslim Brotherhood, but added nostalgia for Turkey's Ottoman past as an additional ingredient in its ideology. As one scholar has observed, "If Kemalist identity is predicated on denial of the Ottoman past, Islamists reconstruct that past as paradise lost."²⁰ Reversing Kemalist attempts to create a modern Turkish nation-state, thus, became a key motivating force for the Milli Görüş.

Given Turkey's secular order, the movement built its organizational strength mainly in Germany, where Erbakan, its founder, had studied and where there is a large Turkish population. In Germany, a close relationship emerged between the Brotherhood and Milli Görüş, perhaps best illustrated by long-time Brotherhood leader Ibrahim Al-Zayat's marriage to Erbakan's niece, Sabiha.

The relationship, however, goes beyond family connections. The platform of Milli Görüş, with its Manichean worldview, selective interpretation of Islamic history, and fierce anti-Semitism, is strongly influenced by the Brotherhood's founders. Indeed, at Milli Görüş-run mosques across Europe, the staple literature available comprises the Brotherhood's roster of authors, including Said Qutb and Hassan Al-Banna.

Another plank that Milli Görüş adopted from the Muslim Brotherhood is an undying opposition to Europe and the West, founded on the incompatibility of the West's politics and culture with Islamic principles. Thus, as Turkish academic Ihsan Dağı has observed, opposition to Turkey's European orientation lies at the very heart of the Turkish Islamist movement's identity.²¹ Indeed, the main goal of the movement and its affiliated political parties (the National Salvation Party in the 1980s and the Welfare Party in the 1980s and 1990s) was to sever Turkey's connections to the West and reorient Turkey toward a closer union with the Islamic world. In this, they diverged fundamentally from Turkey's center-right parties, which were respectful of religion and of the interests of the pious population but never wavered from Turkey's Western orientation.

These objectives could be glimpsed the few times that Milli Görüş disciples gained political power in Turkey. Erbakan was twice made deputy prime minister in the myriad coalition governments Turkey had in the 1970s—most famously, in an unholy alliance with the center-left CHP in 1974, during Turkey’s invasion of Cyprus. During this stint in government, Erbakan advocated for Sharia and, along with others, issued a public Milli Görüş manifesto decrying the de-Islamization of Turkey.²²

Two decades later, as discussed above, Erbakan would briefly ascend to prime minister as part of a coalition government (1996–1997). It was precisely his attempt to pull Turkey in an Islamist direction that led the military and civilian establishment to engineer a public campaign against his government. This eventually led to the coalition’s downfall, in the so-called “post-modern coup,” in the summer of 1997. Though Erbakan’s administration was too fleeting and weak to affect policy significantly, the early demise of his government did not spell the end of the Milli Görüş ideology. Rather, it taught Turkey’s Islamists important lessons about political survival, and it set the stage for a more thorough transformation of Turkish politics.

The Islamic Movement’s Transformation

Following the ouster of Erbakan’s government and the subsequent closure of the Welfare Party in January 1998, the Islamic conservative movement was stranded in the political wilderness. Erbakan and several of his associates were barred from politics while Erdoğan—then-mayor of Istanbul and a Welfare Party member—served several months in jail for reciting a poem deemed to incite religious hatred. This period of exile shocked the movement, spurring a political transformation that would culminate with the AKP’s formation and its public renunciation of Islamism.

This transformation was initiated and carried out by a young faction, led by Erdoğan and former State Minister Abdullah Gül. Their top-down transfiguration of political Islam in Turkey was both comprehensive and rapid, creating the AKP out of the ashes of the Welfare Party. Yet, as significant to the course of Turkey’s politics as this political evolution of its Islamic conservatives was, it has been the subject of only limited academic study. It is therefore difficult—and perhaps impossible—to fully account for the drivers behind this change.

The difference between the AKP’s positions and those of its Islamic predecessors is perhaps most apparent in the moderation of its rhetoric and attitude toward the European Union (and to the West more broadly). The AKP repudiated Islamism, emphasized its commitment to democracy, and sought to be accepted as a mainstream conservative force, akin to the Christian Democratic parties of Europe.²³ In a 180-degree turn, the new party embraced the market economy and Turkey’s EU membership aspirations.

Indeed, the European Union had been a favorite target of Welfare Party criticism. Gül, who had been seen as Erbakan’s crown prince, is a prime example: prior to the Welfare Party’s stint in government, he frequently gave voice to Welfare’s foreign policy views, variously

calling the European Union a “Christian club” and an organization of rich countries. Gül also warned that Europeans supported Kurdish nationalists and that Turkish membership would lead foreign capital to invade the country.²⁴ During his time as a minister in Erbakan’s government, Gül spoke mainly of balancing Turkey’s relations with the West with equally strong ties to other countries.

Yet, after the Welfare Party’s ouster from power and subsequent closure, Gül—like other leaders of the Welfare Party’s successor, the new Virtue Party—came to view the European Union favorably, at least as a useful tool in Islamism’s political struggle. The Virtue Party’s leadership adopted the European Union’s Copenhagen Criteria as a tool to fight against the closure of political parties and in general against what they described as human rights violations. As one scholar observes, “after his party’s experience in power and with the military, the image and meaning of the European Union changed for Abdullah Gül too. Now the [Customs] Union was an organization representing human rights and democratic standards.”²⁵

When the Constitutional Court closed down the Virtue Party as well (on the grounds that it was simply the continuation of the Welfare Party under another name), the Islamic movement overtly split into two competing parties: the old-school Felicity Party (FP), run by long-time Erbakan loyalist Recai Kutan, and the AKP, led by the “young reformers” such as Gül, Erdoğan, and Bülent Arınç. By this time, it was not only the AKP that was enthusiastically pro-European; even the orthodox Islamists of the FP had now embraced EU membership for Turkey.

When Turkey went through a deep financial crisis in late 2000 and early 2001, the established political parties of the country lost their public legitimacy. This political vacuum provided the AKP with an excellent opportunity, and in the November 2002 elections, the AKP came in first, with almost 36 percent of the vote. Since only one other party—the center-left CHP—crossed the 10 percent threshold required to win seats in parliament, the AKP was easily able to form a single-party government.

Was the AKP’s transformation tactical and opportunistic, or did it reflect a sincere change of heart? Arguments can be made both ways. One possible interpretation is that the Islamic conservatives came to understand that they could not ascend to, let alone maintain, power as long as the military and Kemalist establishment effectively exercised veto power and were able to unseat governments. To change this situation, they needed an outside lever. And the European Union, seeking to democratize Turkey, was increasingly zeroing in on the role of the military in the Turkish state, which was fundamentally incompatible with EU membership. Thus, the Islamic conservatives might have come to see the European Union as a way to defeat the institutional advantages of their political opponents.

The alternative interpretation is that their brief time in government, from 1996 to 1997, had a sobering effect on a good portion of the Islamic movement’s leadership. No longer merely the opposition, they now had to be responsible for Turkey’s development. This forced them to recognize Turkey’s economic dependence on Europe and thus made them accept the

Customs Union. Similarly, their experience at the hands of the military increasingly made them conversant in the principles of European democracy, with which they sought to confront the Kemalist establishment. Thus, they turned to the European Court of Human Rights when they sought to overturn the closure of their parties; and it was European legal reasoning that they employed in support of their case. In this interpretation, the Islamic conservatives came to see Europe not only as a lever, but as the democratic umbrella under which they could operate on equal terms with other political forces.²⁶

Both of these perspectives appear to provide some explanatory power, and in all likelihood, each holds true to varying degrees for different persons and groupings within the Islamic conservative movement. Propaganda tends to be self-fulfilling: the more young AKP cadres listened to the democratic and pro-European rhetoric of their leaders, the more likely it was to become a part of their worldview. But it is unlikely that the political metamorphosis that gave birth to the AKP produced a radical change in the fundamental worldview of the movement's leaders or its base of supporters. At the very least, their transformation was shallow enough that events over time could lead them to return to their original thinking.

The Foreign Policy Worldview of the AKP: The Writings of Ahmet Davutoğlu

The early thinking of the AKP's founders, including both Gül and Erdoğan, very much aligned with Erbakan's anti-Western view of the world. But the task of fitting that ideology into a new foreign policy, and reconciling it with the AKP's public acceptance of the European Union, fell to the Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's chief foreign policy advisor and, since 2009, Turkey's foreign minister. A deeper understanding of the role of ideological factors behind Turkish foreign policy requires closer attention to the worldview of its chief architect. With a long academic career preceding his ascent to political fame, Davutoğlu has left a substantial trail of published work that provides ample insights into his worldview.²⁷

While his most well-known work is the 2000 book *Stratejik Derinlik (Strategic Depth)*, of equal interest are his earlier works: his doctoral dissertation, republished in 1993 as *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory*, and his 1994 volume *Civilizational Transformation and the Muslim World*, published while he served as a researcher at the International Islamic University in Malaysia.²⁸ These works are dense, theoretical treatises, as are several lengthy articles published in the Turkish journal *Divan* in the late 1990s. The thrust of these works is a deep conviction that the "conflicts and contrasts between Western and Islamic political thought originate mainly from their philosophical, methodological and theoretical background rather than from mere institutional and historical differences."²⁹ Davutoğlu focuses on the ontological difference between Islam and all other civilizations—particularly the West. These are not merely arcane academic publications or the early writings of a thinker whose understanding of the world has evolved over time: Davutoğlu has long reiterated the same views, showing their continued relevance to his thinking. In a 2010 interview, for example, he stressed the point:

All religions and civilizations before Islamic civilization had established a demigod category between god and man. In fact, civilizations except the Islamic civilization always regarded god, man and nature on the same ontological level. I named this "ontological proximity." ... Islam, on the other hand, rejects ontological proximity between god, nature and man and establishes an ontological hierarchy of Allah, man and nature.³⁰

The political relevance of this chain of existence is expressed, according to Davutoğlu, by the Islamic concept of *tawhid*, or the unity of God. As Michael Koplow has observed, *tawhid* for Davutoğlu "informs a practical theory of the unity of all aspects of life, as opposed to the secular division of matters belonging to 'church' and 'state.'" According to Davutoğlu, Koplow continues, "In Islamic political theory ... it is 'almost impossible to find a political justification without reference to absolute sovereignty of Allah.'" ³¹ *Tawhid*, for Davutoğlu, results in "the unity of truth and the unity of life which provides a strong internal consistency."³² Thus, the hierarchy of god, man, and nature is not only a metaphysical belief about the makeup of the world, but an ordering principle. Each category of being dictates the structure of the one below it.

By contrast, Davutoğlu castigates the West's "modernist paradigm," which is distorted by its "anthropocentric epistemology" and what he terms a "particularization of epistemological sources (revelation and reason)."³³ Rather than the unity of being and truth expressed in the concept of *tawhid*, Western Enlightenment thought distinguished among ways of knowing the world, separating divine revelation from insights gleaned by reason alone. This "dichotomous differentiation between the sources of knowledge" led, according to Davutoğlu, to "the peripherality of revelation in the modern era" and the West's emphasis on the individual's reason and experience as the sole reliable sources of knowledge.³⁴ By thus breaking the "ontological proximity" between god and man and hubristically placing its faith in the ability of human reason to order the social and political world, a process Davutoğlu calls the "erosion of its moral base due to a lack of normativity," the Enlightenment created an "acute crisis of Western civilization."³⁵

For Davutoğlu the implications of this divergence between the Western and Islamic worlds are not merely metaphysical or theological, they are political. It demonstrates that Turkey's long-standing effort to become part of the "West" is both impossible and undesirable. It is impossible, because it goes against the country's Islamic nature: "the failure of the Westernization-oriented intelligentsia in the Muslim countries ... demonstrates the extensive characteristic of this civilizational confrontation."³⁶ For Turkey specifically, Davutoğlu concludes that the republican project was "an ambitious and utopian project to achieve a total civilizational change which ignored the real cultural historical, social and political forces in the society." Thus, "the Turkish experience in this century proved that an imposed civilizational refusal, adaptation and change ... cannot be successful."³⁷

Moreover, grafting Western civilization onto an Islamic country is undesirable, because the West is in a state of crisis. Indeed, Davutoğlu argues in 2010 that "we have reached a point at which the Western paradigm and the underlying Enlightenment philosophy have said all

that they can say.”³⁸ The unity of being, captured by the concept of *tawhid*, suggests that the West’s moral corruption must metastasize to other areas of human activity. If the affairs of god and man are one, then abandoning the former must doom the latter. The West’s celebration of reason ineluctably will lead to the crumbling of its political order. Thus, in 1994, Davutoğlu asserted that capitalism and socialism are “different forms of the same philosophical background”³⁹ and that “the collapse of socialism is an indication for a comprehensive civilizational crisis and transformation rather than an ultimate victory of western capitalism.” The failure of the Soviet system, rather than a victory for the West, was but the first step in the collapse of European domination of the world, to be followed by the collapse of Western capitalism.⁴⁰

Davutoğlu approvingly characterizes the emergence of the concept of the Islamic state as a response to the imposition of Western civilization on the rest of the world, but he takes the argument one step further: viewing globalization as a challenge to the nation-state system, he suggests that “the core issue for [the] Islamic polity seems to be to reinterpret its political tradition and theory as an alternative world-system rather than merely as a program for the Islamization of nation-states.”⁴¹

These early works provide a window into the philosophical worldview underlying AKP foreign policy. Yet they are more abstract than concrete, and certainly no policy blueprints. *Stratejik Derinlik*, published in 2000, would fill that gap. Davutoğlu’s key argument is that Turkey possesses an underutilized strategic depth, which is related explicitly to its Ottoman legacy; he defines this concept as the combination of geostrategic location and historical depth. While geostrategic location is obvious, historical depth is a more fuzzy concept. To Davutoğlu, it stems from Turkey’s imperial heritage: Turkey is not just any ordinary nation-state created from the spoils of decolonization, but it has a legacy of statehood that makes it unique, one of only a handful such political entities. That imperial heritage, in turn, provides rich cultural and historical links to the Balkans, the Middle East, and Eurasia that Davutoğlu castigates the Kemalist republic for ignoring. To Davutoğlu, these links provide an opportunity for Turkey to rebuild a role as a regional power—indeed, a leader—particularly of the Muslim world at a time when it has become, to Davutoğlu, “the focal point in international relations.”

In *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu operationalizes his criticism of the republic. While Kemalist Turkey built its foreign policy only on one alliance—with the West—and on its role as a bulwark, a barrier, and later a bridge, Davutoğlu finds these concepts wanting. To Davutoğlu, Turkey’s historical and geographic depth provide it with an opportunity to be at the epicenter of world politics, rather than relegated to the periphery—an active force, rather than constrained to a specific role. The centerpiece of Davutoğlu’s concept of strategic depth is, thus, to build alternative alliances to the Western one; in effect, to counterbalance the West with other coalitions in order for Turkey to gain independence and freedom of maneuver in international affairs.

In this, Davutoğlu is not alone. Ismail Cem, his left-wing predecessor as foreign minister from 1997 to 2002 and a strategic thinker in his own right, similarly argued that Kemalist

Turkey ignored its history and was particularly and unnecessarily dismissive to Arabs.⁴² But where Davutoğlu diverges from Cem is in his emphasis on Ottoman legacy and Islamic identity as the key to a new Turkish grandeur.

Davutoğlu by no means suggests that Turkey should build alliances only with Muslim countries; indeed, a key foundation of his analysis includes anti-colonialism and Third Worldism; that is, being rooted in an opposition to Western political and intellectual world hegemony. Thus, Davutoğlu finds commonalities between Europe's treatment of Russia and its treatment of Turkey, and he suggests forming an alignment with Moscow. Yet the thrust of the argument emphasizes a need to capitalize on Turkey's Ottoman past as a leader of Islam.

Analytically, Davutoğlu focuses on the inconsistencies of the nation-states of the Muslim world, many of which are undeniably postcolonial creations with little organic history as political entities. This leads him to search for an alternate ordering principle, one that he finds in the common Islamic identity shared by these lands. As Alexander Murinson has observed:

[Davutoğlu] elevates the unity of Muslim global *umma* to the status of the ideal geopolitical structure and deprecates the notion of the nation-state. In his writings, Davutoğlu substitutes *umma*, a term with religious connotations, by the more neutral term "Islamic civilization," but he preserves the emphasis on the religious aspect of civilizational clash.⁴³

After interviewing Davutoğlu, reporter Joshua Walker says that Davutoğlu considered Turkey to be "the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a trans-regional power that helps to once again unify and lead the Muslim world."⁴⁴

This, in turn, forms the basis for the doctrine of "zero problems with neighbors," which was an animating concept of Davutoğlu's foreign policy. He rejects Kemalism as isolationist and distrustful toward Turkey's neighbors. In its place, Davutoğlu argues that Turkey should focus on restoring its role as a regional power. By emphasizing its Islamic identity, Turkey could both establish its affinity with other Middle Eastern states and peddle an alternate geostrategic vision to the corrupt nation-state model imposed on the region.

In this, Davutoğlu's writings embrace and reflect the non-sectarian approach already adopted by the Milli Görüş movement decades earlier. Especially following the 1979 revolution, many Turkish Islamists viewed the Islamization of Iran with admiration and began to cultivate ties with Tehran. As a result, historical and sectarian hostility was gradually replaced by a desire to emulate many aspects of Iran's Islamic revolution.⁴⁵

Such perceptions among Turkish Islamists align, in turn, with the Muslim Brotherhood's views. Unlike the heavily anti-Shi'a Salafis, the Brotherhood opposes sectarian differences among Muslims and supports unity. Early on, it developed ties to Iranian Islamists and endorsed Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution—although it later expressed disappointment that

he established a sectarian rather than an inclusive Islamic regime.⁴⁶ Already in 1959, the head of the powerful Al-Azhar University in Cairo recognized the theological legitimacy of the Ja'fari Shi'a as a *madhab* (school of Islamic Jurisprudence) in its own right, alongside the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali schools.⁴⁷ Conversely, future Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i translated two books by Muslim Brotherhood ideologist Hassan Al-Banna into Persian. Similarly, Erbakan's embrace of the Islamic world began with a much-hyped trip to Iran, indicating the absence of a sectarian agenda in the Milli Görüş movement.

Thus, Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision was founded on a pan-Islamic ideological foundation inherited from the Milli Görüş and Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike later AKP foreign policy, it was distinctly non-sectarian. Quite to the contrary, the "zero problems" doctrine was rooted in Davutoğlu's writings on Turkey's inheritance of a common Islamic identity and could thus allow for courting of both Shi'a Iran and Nusayri-dominated Syria. In this, AKP foreign policy both demonstrates its ideological connection to Turkey's Islamists and builds upon their previous efforts.

The AKP and a Changing Turkey

In contrast to the unstable coalition governments of the 1990s, today Turkey has been dominated for more than a decade by a single political force, the AKP and its charismatic leader, Erdoğan. During the AKP's tenure, the country has experienced a powerful economic boom. Turkey is now the world's 16th-largest economy, with a powerful industrial base geared toward exports and a large domestic market with increasing purchasing power. This growth has been accompanied by wide-ranging political reforms that in 2004 allowed Turkey to begin accession negotiations with the European Union. But most of this progress and reform occurred in the first three years of the AKP's rule. Since then, Prime Minister Erdoğan and the AKP have grown increasingly authoritarian and have flirted with Islamist policies. While Turkey's economy has continued to grow, although not as quickly as before, the record is much more mixed in the political field. Recently, Turkey's political development has stagnated, and even backtracked, in several areas.

During its first term, the AKP largely lived up to its rhetoric of a transformational political force. Prime Minister Erdoğan's government implemented some of the most thorough economic and political reforms in Turkey's history, which led to an extended period of high growth, broadened minority rights, and allowed Turkey to begin negotiations for EU membership. By late 2004, the AKP-dominated parliament had passed seven large reform packages, usually with the support of its main opposition, the CHP. Its economic policies, building on an International Monetary Fund aid package, managed to stabilize Turkey's currency for the first time in decades, opening the way for foreign investment and spectacular economic growth.⁴⁸ Likewise, the U.S. offer of a \$1 billion loan guarantee ensured that the turmoil of the Iraq war did not affect the economy. Also during this time, Turkish laws and regulations were brought in line with the requirements for EU membership, the military's role in politics was reduced, and it became considerably more difficult to force a political party to close down. The AKP struck a new, more tolerant tone concerning the Kurdish issue and implemented reforms to broaden minority cultural rights.

These reforms, such as liberalizing the economy and redressing some of the illiberal structures and practices that were the legacy of the Turkish republic, were met with broad support among Western leaders and intellectuals. That support, to some extent, continues to this day. The AKP's critics, however, were unconvinced. With little evidence of any alleged Islamist or authoritarian hidden agenda,⁴⁹ they pointed to a systematic practice of purging government offices and replacing civil servants with individuals close to the party's ideological views.

Around 2005, after accession negotiations with the EU started (a long-standing Turkish objective), the AKP's reformist zeal appeared to expire rapidly. The growth of anti-Turkish rhetoric in major European states played a role in this reversal, especially the stances of French and German leaders. Their rejection of Turkish EU membership was remarkable for its overt reference to Turkey's cultural identity as a Muslim-majority country. Thus, most Turks concluded that the European Union would treat Turkey differently from other candidate countries. This fanned anti-Western sentiments in Turkey and gave added credence to the Islamic identity politics that cast the world in civilizational terms, as polarized between the West and the Muslim world, which had already taken root in the post-September 11 political atmosphere.

Yet the AKP's change of heart was not just the fault of the West. Leading AKP figures appeared to lose faith in the usefulness of Europe to their domestic agenda. The AKP had leveraged the rhetoric of individual freedom to break down the restrictions on religion that Turkey's French-style secularism mandated. But it eventually concluded that European democratic ideals would not provide sufficient leverage to provide a greater public space for the exercise of religion in Turkey. The case of *Leyla Şahin vs. Turkey* at the European Court of Human Rights was particularly eye-opening for the AKP: a female university student barred from attending university with an Islamic headscarf had sued Turkey, arguing (as the AKP leadership did) that the headscarf ban violated her right to free expression and practice of religion. Foreign Minister Gül's wife, Hayrünissa, signed on as a plaintiff in the case, reinforcing the AKP's investment in the issue. But the European Court upheld the headscarf ban, arguing that it conformed to European and Turkish, as defined by the constitution, principles of secularism.⁵⁰ This led to a considerable degree of frustration among AKP supporters.

Most of all, however, during this period the AKP turned away from its focus on EU accession negotiations and began to concentrate on consolidating its power. The big prize was capturing the presidency—which, together with the Constitutional Court, was the only major institution not already under AKP control. The extensive veto powers of the presidency had proved a major impediment to the AKP's ability to freely set the country's agenda, but not for long. In 2007, through a protracted political crisis that saw both a botched military attempt to oppose the AKP's candidate and early elections that returned the AKP to power with a renewed mandate, Erdoğan managed to install former Foreign Minister Gül in the presidential palace at Çankaya.

Once its second term began, advances in Turkey's democratization and European integration slowed. Instead, this period was marked by significant backtracking in a number of areas.

First, the capture of the presidency allowed the AKP to speed up the process of purging the state bureaucracy of career civil servants, systematically staffing state agencies with members close to its own ideology. This primarily meant recruiting members or sympathizers of certain religious orders, particularly the Naqshbandiya order, to which Erdoğan and much of the AKP leadership belongs, and the modernist Muslim movement.

Led by self-exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen, who currently resides in Pennsylvania, the modernist Muslim movement has grown in the past three decades to become Turkey's largest social movement.⁵¹

Secondly, the AKP demonstrated a worrying tendency to use its growing influence over the judiciary to intimidate the opposition. This tendency was visible early on in the frequent lawsuits Prime Minister Erdoğan frequently brought against critical journalists for slander and defamation. However, it has been most vividly made apparent by large-scale politicized investigations into alleged coup-plotters, known as the "Ergenekon" and "sledgehammer" cases. These investigations—targeting former and serving military officers, journalists, and academics—initially seemed to be much-needed opportunities to rid Turkey of shady connections among the state, organized crime, and the death squads used against suspected terrorists in the 1990s. Yet prosecutors rapidly overstepped their boundaries, arresting several hundred suspects, including university rectors, NGO activists, and journalists.⁵² While some of the detainees have likely been involved in wrongdoing, no evidence has been presented against many, if not most, of the suspects, some of whom have now spent several years in detention but have yet to be sentenced.⁵³ Prosecutors, defying belief, accused the supposed "Ergenekon" terrorist organization—whose existence has yet to be proven—of having masterminded every single act of political violence in Turkey's modern history.⁵⁴ Moreover, the indictments included deep inconsistencies and internal contradictions, as well as instances where evidence had clearly been manipulated.⁵⁵ To make matters worse, evidence from the investigation was systematically leaked to the pro-AKP press.⁵⁶ The investigation's effect, and probably its intent, was to sow fear among the opponents of the AKP and Islamic conservatism.⁵⁷

Some of the arrests specifically targeted opponents of the Fethullah Gülen movement, which generally supported the AKP until late 2011. This included Hanefi Avcı, a police chief once sympathetic to the Gülen movement who had published a book accusing the movement of manipulating judicial processes and appointments.⁵⁸ In early 2011, two well-known journalists who had earlier helped unveil the involvement of security forces in political assassinations were jailed, accused of being part of such a cabal themselves. One of them, Ahmet Şık, had just completed a book on the Gülen movement's growing dominance over the police force.

Third, the AKP sought to intimidate and control the independent media. Prime Minister Erdoğan has publicly and repeatedly rebuked media outlets that criticize the government, urging the public to boycott them.⁵⁹ With control of the presidency, the AKP was able to put the power of the state behind his admonitions. In 2007, regulators seized the country's second-largest media group, Sabah/ATV, subsequently auctioning it off in a single-bidder auction to the Çalık energy company, whose media wing was run by Erdoğan's son-in-law.⁶⁰ The next year, Prime Minister Erdoğan targeted the country's largest media group, Doğan Media (DMG), after it reported on a corruption case in Germany in which the AKP was accused of siphoning off millions from charities to fund pro-AKP media outlets in Turkey.⁶¹ Tax authorities slammed DMG with fines totaling almost \$3 billion.⁶² DMG then sold off some

of its media outlets, notably its daily *Milliyet* newspaper and Star television channel, and DMG CEO Aydın Doğan's daughter, Arzuhan Doğan Yalçındağ, resigned from the chairmanship of Turkey's most powerful business association, the Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Association (TÜSIAD).⁶³ This eventually enabled DMG to reach a settlement with the finance ministry in 2011, whereby some of the fines were dropped. As for TÜSIAD, it continued to be in Erdoğan's sights: ahead of the 2010 constitutional referendum, the prime minister threatened the organization with elimination unless it took a stand for or against the proposed amendments.⁶⁴

As a result of such tactics, the few media outlets that are not controlled by the AKP or that do not already toe the government line have, for the most part, become increasingly prudent in their editorial policies. Those journalists who were not reined in by their editors—including many Kurdish activists—have been pursued individually by the regime. Turkey now has the unenviable reputation of jailing more journalists than China and Iran combined. As a result, Turkey has fallen like a stone on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders. In 2008, Turkey was listed at 102 of 173 countries; it fell to 154 of 179 countries in 2013, six spots behind Russia.⁶⁵ Following the June 2013 demonstrations that began in Gezi Park, the media climate deteriorated further, with a full-scale purge of a number of news outlets that reported critically on the developments.

These burgeoning authoritarian tendencies have been coupled with Prime Minister Erdoğan's increasingly suffocating personal dominance of the Turkish political scene. From 2012 onward, Prime Minister Erdoğan set his sights on the presidency. Tellingly, however, he was not content with the current, limited powers of that post. Instead, Erdoğan sought to amend the constitution to turn Turkey's system of government into a presidential one, resembling the Russian system much more than the U.S. one, let alone France's system. According to the AKP's proposed blueprint, any semblance of checks and balances would disappear. The president would have the power to dissolve parliament; would preside over the meetings of the cabinet; and would personally appoint cabinet ministers, half of the judges of the constitutional court, all ambassadors, and all university rectors.

Thus, power in Turkey is increasingly concentrated in Erdoğan's person, and policymaking is increasingly de-coupled from the institutions of the state. This personal power grab has begun to generate frictions within Prime Minister Erdoğan's own Islamic conservative camp. His efforts to concentrate power have not only taken place at the expense of the military and secular bureaucracy; once these impediments to his rule were vanquished, he also increasingly sought to undermine the political standing of President Gül and the Fethullah Gülen movement.

In the 2011 elections, supporters of both were purged from the AKP parliamentary lists, which Erdoğan handpicked. As a result, President Gül and the Gülen movement have formed an alliance of sorts that is beginning to counterbalance Prime Minister Erdoğan's imperiousness. Gül has begun to chart a new course, positioning himself as the leading advocate for further democratic reforms and European integration. Meanwhile, organizations associated with the Gülen movement have begun aligning themselves with Gül's positions.

And, after the influential Gülenist Journalists and Writers Union penned an open letter in support of media freedom in April 2013, it appears that the Gülen movement is seeking to reverse its public association with the excesses of the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials. Whether these forces will be able to derail Erdoğan's plans remains to be seen. In late 2013, the split between the AKP and the Gülen movement widened and became public, especially following the government's decision to close down Turkey's ubiquitous private preparatory schools, many of which are run by the movement. In response, the Gülenists released leaked documents from a 2004 meeting of Turkey's national security council that implicate the AKP government in efforts to monitor and counteract the movement.⁶⁶ The outcome of this power struggle is yet to be determined.

Tellingly, as a result of Erdoğan's increasing authoritarianism, the AKP's close alliance with Turkey's liberal intelligentsia—so important for the party's international reputation—has all but collapsed. Some of the most ardent supporters of the AKP over the years, such as columnists Cengiz Çandar, Hasan Cemal, and Ahmet Altan came to conclude that the AKP was no longer a force for democratization.⁶⁷ As a result, Altan ended up being sacked as editor of *Taraf*, Cemal was fired from his job at *Milliyet*, and Çandar reportedly only narrowly escaped arrest.

The AKP undoubtedly deserves credit for dismantling the rigid statist structure that had dominated Turkey for decades and led to the country's stagnation. Many taboos have been broken. The combination of liberal political reforms and the globalization of Turkey's economy have created space for an open public sphere that would have been unimaginable in Turkey even a decade ago.

Yet it is increasingly evident that the alternative to secular statism will not be liberal democracy. While the accomplishments of the AKP's early days are undeniable, it has retreated significantly from its moderate image and democratic ideals. From having been a force for democratic development, the AKP has, the evidence thus far suggests, turned into an increasingly authoritarian, sectarian, and personality-driven force, bent on sustaining its position in power by playing on divisions within Turkish society. It is worth examining whether and how these developments have affected Turkish foreign policy, both in terms of its decision-making process and its changing priorities, and worth pondering what the implications of the current political jostling might be for Turkey's future external relations.

The AKP's Foreign Policy Shift

The defining feature of Turkey's conduct on the world stage over the last decade has been its dynamism, verging on seeming unpredictability. Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, however, has been marked by one constant: its distinct and far-reaching shift away from the traditional tenets of Kemalism. This shift moved Turkey away from traditional Western-oriented diplomacy and instead led it to embrace the objective of becoming a leading regional power in the Middle East.

Yet the implementation of this shift has been far from linear. Indeed, it can be divided into a first phase, focused on Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's concept of "zero problems with neighbors," and a second, in which Turkey was increasingly drawn into the growing sectarian conflict of the Middle East. Now, there is early evidence of a third swerve underway, back to "zero problems."

From Kemalism to "Zero Problems": The Birth of AKP Foreign Policy

The official leitmotif of AKP foreign policy, influenced by Davutoğlu's thinking long before he became foreign minister, was "zero problems with neighbors"—a term that came into wide use in the AKP's second term. The premise was that previous Turkish governments had treated the country's neighbors with suspicion, mainly as a result of their own insecurity. By engaging these neighbors and seeking positive relationships, the AKP thought it could fundamentally transform Turkey's hitherto defensive regional posture. In short order, the AKP embarked on openings to Iran, Syria, the Kurds of Iraq, and Armenia. These were widely touted in the West as the harbinger of a progressive, cooperative Turkey replacing the nationalist and distrustful attitudes of the past.

Under this policy, Ankara rapidly developed relations with Syria to the level of a strategic partnership; Turkish officials also began developing closer economic and political ties with Iran and Russia, large energy providers to the growing Turkish economy. In a bold but ultimately failed move, the AKP leadership also sought to mend fences with Armenia, a country with which Turkey had never established diplomatic relations, due to the controversy over the mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and Armenia's occupation of a sixth of Azerbaijan's territory in the early 1990s. Finally, the AKP also eventually changed Turkish policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan, which had long been marked by hostility. This was helped by growing concern in Erbil over the threat to Kurdish autonomy from Baghdad following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq when the Status of Forces

Agreement lapsed in December 2011. This allowed Turkey to portray itself as a partner rather than as a threat to Iraq's Kurds.

From “Zero Problems” to Regime Change: Turkey and the Arab Upheavals

The Arab upheavals beginning in the winter of 2011, however, proved to be a particular challenge for Turkey, which seemed to struggle with formulating its stance in the face of unfolding events. The “zero problems” policy, for instance, led Ankara to accept the Iranian government's repression of the Green Movement in Iran. In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan was among the first to congratulate Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his fraudulent reelection. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu repeatedly refused to discuss the validity of the Iranian presidential elections, promising “to respect the outcome of Iran's political process.”⁶⁸ Yet, Ankara was not only an early cheerleader of the Egyptian revolution, but Erdoğan was the first world leader to call on Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak to resign, to “meet his people's desire for change.” The contrast between the Iranian and Egyptian cases was remarkable.⁶⁹

If Ankara was unequivocal on Egypt, Libya proved more complicated. When violence in Libya escalated, the Turkish leadership initially refrained from taking a clear stance. In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, at the outset of the Libyan revolution, opposed U.N. sanctions on the Muammar Gaddafi regime and rejected calls for NATO involvement in the developing civil war. Erdoğan, Gül, and Davutoğlu cast doubt on Western motives, referring to “hidden agendas” and the West's thirst for Libya's oil resources.⁷⁰ Perhaps because Erdoğan had—just four months prior, in December 2010—received the Al-Gaddafi International Prize for Human Rights, the Turkish leadership initially opposed U.N. sanctions on the Gaddafi regime, rejecting calls for NATO involvement in the developing civil war.⁷¹ Many AKP leaders saw the intervention as a Western attempt to attack a Muslim country and grab its oil resources; Turkey had also invested heavily in Libya, between \$8 and \$13 billion, primarily through construction companies, and was wary of the effects of military intervention on Turkish investments and Turkish citizens in Libya.⁷²

Ankara eventually relented when some of its reservations were taken into account and the Arab League's position threatened to push Turkey into international isolation. Thus, Ankara approved the NATO operation, but not before angry protesters had picketed the Turkish consulate in Benghazi over Ankara's indecision. Nominally, Turkey switched positions because some of its reservations about the NATO intervention were taken into account. It is more likely, however, that Turkish leaders grew worried that, with the Arab League backing intervention, they would be left as Gaddafi's sole supporters on the world stage. Ever concerned about appearances and attuned to popular opinion, Prime Minister Erdoğan understood that such international isolation would be perceived as weakness. Thus, Turkey called for Gaddafi's resignation in April, formally withdrew its ambassador from Tripoli, and recognized the Transitional Council in early July.

It was the deteriorating situation in Syria, however, that proved to be the most difficult for Ankara to handle. A country with which Turkey almost went to war in 1998, Syria had become what one expert called “the model success story for [Turkey’s] improved foreign policy.”⁷³ A rapprochement developed between the two countries, which included a close personal relationship between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Assad. As the Assad regime began using ever more violent measures against civilian protesters over the spring and summer of 2011, Ankara counseled the Syrian regime to exercise restraint. However, in spite of repeated trips by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu to Damascus, Turkish efforts bore no fruit. Gradually, Turkey turned against Assad, coming out for regime change and coordinating the Sunni-dominated opposition movement and the Free Syrian Army.

Similarly, Turkey’s security ties with the United States have oscillated wildly in recent years. From 2009 to 2010, Turkey was focused on a rapprochement with Iran and stuck on a collision course with Israel. This put Ankara squarely at odds with Washington, raising questions in the West about Turkey’s continued membership in the Western alliance.⁷⁴ But from 2011 to 2012, Turkey reaffirmed its strategic ties with the United States by agreeing to place missile defense batteries on its territory and, at least on Iran, becoming more closely aligned with the United States.

Understanding the future direction of Turkey’s foreign policy will first require tracing the serpentine path it has traveled over the last decade as well as identifying the sources of Turkey’s conduct.

Syria: From Foe to Friend and Back

Turkey's policy toward Syria in the past decade has been a roller-coaster ride. Having viewed Syria as a threat to be handled mainly through deterrence at the turn of the century, by the early 2000s Turkey's position had flipped to engagement; it courted the Syrian regime. In the last two years, however, the relationship once again turned hostile, with Ankara now overtly seeking regime change in Damascus. As the civil war continues to rage next door, Turkey has become increasingly alarmed about the violence that is increasingly spilling across the border, even as it contributes to that violence by providing support—including arms, training, and unfettered access to the Turkey-Syria border—to the most extreme elements of the Syrian opposition.

Although Turkey desperately wants to see stability return to Syria, it defines stability based on its own interests: securing political dominance for Syria's Sunni majority in order to clamp down on minorities, especially the Kurds. Ankara has, thus far, been willing to put up with the conflict raging in Syria in the hopes of securing a longer-term strategic advantage. But it never expected the violence to last so long; nor did it expect the international community to be so reluctant to intervene. Now, Turkey might be starting to reexamine its strategic calculus.

From Foe to Friend: Turkey and Syria after the Cold War

During the Cold War, the Turkish-Syrian border was effectively an extension of the Iron Curtain. Turkey was NATO's eastern flank state, while Syria was firmly in the Soviet camp. The Cold War tied Ankara's hands, to some extent, but the differences between Ankara and Damascus extended well beyond the U.S.-Soviet standoff.⁷⁵

A fundamental disagreement separating the two countries involved a bitter territorial dispute over the former Sanjak of Alexandretta (now Turkey's Hatay province), which was granted to Syria in the 1923 treaty of Lausanne that established modern Turkey but which was annexed to Turkey in 1939 during the French mandate over Syria. While the intensity of the dispute has varied over time, it set the baseline for an antagonistic relationship.

By the 1960s, Turkey's decision to build dams to generate power and provide irrigation across southeastern Turkey sharpened the dispute. Syria feared that Turkey's massive development projects would deprive it of water from the Euphrates, on which Syria is heavily dependent. With the building of the gigantic Ataturk dam in the 1980s, Damascus feared that Turkey would turn water into a weapon.⁷⁶

These water conflicts contributed to Damascus's decision to harbor militant and terrorist groups targeting Turkey. These included Turkish left-wing terrorist groups and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), but also, most importantly, Kurdistan's terrorist and Marxist-Leninist PKK. The PKK was first allowed to establish itself alongside ASALA in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, and later in Syria proper. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in fact lived openly in Damascus from the early 1980s until 1998. Thanks to Syrian support, along with the power vacuum in northern Iraq, the PKK was able to mount a near-mortal challenge to Turkish sovereignty in the early 1990s.

All these factors turned Syria into Ankara's principal foreign enemy and, by the late 1990s, brought the two countries to the brink of war. But Turkey had the upper hand. It had brought the threat from the PKK under a modicum of control, conducting military operations far inside Kurdish-inhabited Iraqi territory from 1995 onward, and aligned itself with Israel, squeezing Syria.

As a result, in late 1998, Turkey was able to credibly threaten Damascus with war unless it expelled Öcalan, moving military hardware to the Syrian border and conducting large military exercises in the vicinity. Syria took these threats seriously, kicking Öcalan out and ceasing its support for the PKK.⁷⁷

With the PKK gone, the main irritant in the Turkish-Syrian relationship was removed. This laid the groundwork for a relatively rapid warming of relations, a process greatly facilitated by the death of Hafiz Al-Assad in 2000 and Syria's ensuing efforts to shed its regional isolation. By mid-2002, merely four years after having nearly gone to war, the two countries signed a military training agreement. Turkey's rapprochement with Damascus thus preceded the AKP government; but it was under Erdoğan that it turned into an open embrace.⁷⁸

In particular, the AKP's perceived independence from the United States altered Syria's attitude toward Turkey. The Turkish parliament's failure in March 2003 to muster enough votes to pass a resolution acquiescing to U.S. requests to open a northern front in Iraq was a major factor in bringing Damascus and Ankara together, as they shared apprehensions about the U.S. invasion. This provided enough common ground for President Assad to conduct the first presidential-level Syrian state visit to Turkey in January 2004. Afterward, ties rapidly warmed. In 2005, suggesting a rare convergence between secularist Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and the AKP, Sezer visited Damascus while Prime Minister Erdoğan invited Assad to vacation with him in Turkey. Thus, by the time international outrage at Syria built in 2005—over its participation in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri—Ankara refused to denounce its new friend and join in an international consensus that supported Syria's isolation.

Soon after, Syria became the poster-child of Turkey's "zero problems" policy. "For us," Davutoğlu once said, "Syria is not just a neighboring country. We have a common history, we share a very long land border and we are destined to live next to each other. Our societies are interwoven through the ties of kinship."⁷⁹ Indeed, Syria, the AKP hoped, would play a special role as Ankara's conduit to the Arab world, in which the AKP was seeking to

expand its influence. Since the areas of Iraq bordering Turkey are predominantly Kurdish and outside Baghdad's control, Syria is effectively Turkey's only Arab neighbor.

As would become painfully clear later on, Turkey's outreach was focused heavily on developing ties with the Syrian regime, not its people. The relationship grew rapidly: by 2007, a free trade agreement entered into force; until the breakdown of Turkish-Israeli relations in 2009, Ankara sought to broker talks between Damascus and Jerusalem; and by 2009, a high-level Strategic Partnership Council had been assembled, initiating yearly joint cabinet meetings. In the process, visa requirements were mutually abolished.

The pace with which such a close relationship developed was possible mainly due to two factors: first, Turkey's disregard for the West's consensus policy on Syria; and second, the close personal tie between Erdoğan and Assad.⁸⁰ Indeed, it is clear that Erdoğan planned to cultivate Syria into a junior partner in Turkey's much greater regional ambitions. Whether Ankara understood or was bothered by the fact that Assad did not represent the popular will of Syrians is unclear. The distinction between regime and society, however, would soon undermine Turkey's Syria policy.

From “Zero Problems” to Regime Change

The Arab uprisings that began in 2011 made Turkey's regime-focused policy untenable. Although he stayed on the sidelines during Iran's 2009 Green Revolution, now that unrest was spreading from Tunisia to Egypt, Prime Minister Erdoğan sought to position Turkey on the side of the Sunni Arab populations and against their regimes. The contradictions between this approach and Turkey's “zero problems” policy, which had not anticipated a possible conflict between ties with regimes on the one hand and the AKP's and Erdoğan's soft power and image in the Arab streets on the other, became blatant only when the uprisings spread to Syria.

Thus, from mid-2011 onward, Ankara's Syria policy gradually sought to adjust to this new reality. It did so in several stages: first by demanding reform and then by switching into overt opposition to the Assad regime—allowing Turkey's policy to move in an increasingly sectarian direction in the process.

In many ways, the Syrian crisis proved to be a test case for the “zero problems” policy. Ankara had dismissed Western concerns over its ties to rogue regimes—including Hamas and the Iranian and Sudanese regimes—by claiming that Turkey would gain influence that would benefit the West, influence that the West could not get on its own. Syria was a chance for Turkey to showcase its newfound stature and cash in on some of the political capital it had accumulated.

Thus, throughout 2011, Turkish officials and especially Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu sought to convince Assad to reform and to abstain from using violence against civilians. As Assad cracked down ever more viciously on civilian protesters during the spring and summer of 2011, Davutoğlu traveled to Damascus repeatedly, pressing the Syrian regime to

exercise restraint. By June 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan deplored Assad's "inhumane crackdown" and stated that "we can't support Syria amidst all this."⁸¹

Yet, unfortunately for Turkey and embarrassingly for Erdoğan, it soon became clear that whatever influence it thought it had was useless: Assad had no intention whatsoever of engaging in meaningful reform. In early August, confronted with the large-scale crackdown in Hama at the beginning of Ramadan, Turkish leaders spoke of "shock," being unable to "remain indifferent to the violence," and issued condemnations, yet all the while continuing to demand reform in Syria.⁸² When Syria broke what Ankara understood to have been assurances that it would halt violence against civilians in mid-August, Ankara called for "democratic change" but stopped short of demanding Assad's resignation, as several Western states had already done by that time. Only in November 2011 did Prime Minister Erdoğan finally call on Assad to leave.⁸³

With this declaration, Ankara shifted gears: it worked to organize the opposition against Assad while simultaneously seeking to promote a broad international coalition to respond to the Syrian crisis.

From the point when Ankara sided with the opposition to the Assad regime, two issues have come to define Turkish policies on Syria: the sectarian question and the Kurdish dimension.

The Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey's Sectarian Drift

All foreign powers involved in the Syrian crisis have faced the difficult task of dealing with the notoriously fractious Syrian opposition. Different states have pursued different approaches. While the United States and European nations have consistently advocated for broad-based, inclusive leadership of the Syrian opposition, Turkey has paid little attention to diversity, focusing instead on promoting the Muslim Brotherhood.

Even before Ankara burnt its bridges with the Assad regime, its affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood was on display—an affinity that stretches back to the AKP's roots in the Milli Görüş Islamist movement. Prime Minister Erdoğan never hid his endorsement of the group from his Syrian counterpart, having urged Assad during his visits to Damascus to legalize the Brotherhood.⁸⁴ This dovetails with the prominence of Hamas—the Brotherhood's Palestinian wing—in Turkey's relations with Palestinian factions and with Turkey's strong support for Mohammed Morsi following his taking power in Egypt.

Thus, when the Syrian Brotherhood decided to take up arms against the Assad regime, Ankara's fence-sitting became untenable and its turn away from Damascus all but inevitable—not least because support for the Syrian Brotherhood animated the AKP's base. Indeed, when the opportunity to support the installation of Brotherhood-dominated governments across the eastern Mediterranean beckoned, Prime Minister Erdoğan answered the call. He was quick to endorse the vision of a Brotherhood-ruled post-Assad Syria, despite the movement's weakness in Syrian politics. As Turkish writer Kadri Gürsel has

observed, Turkey's policy aims required "the Muslim Brotherhood to fully and absolutely dominate the entirety of Syria. The likelihood of this is close to zero."⁸⁵

Nevertheless, Turkey helped organize, host, and support the Syrian National Council (SNC) as the main representative of the Syrian opposition. In particular, Turkey played up the SNC at an April 2012 meeting of the "Friends of Syria" coalition, working hard to convince its Western allies to support the SNC. Yet, the SNC, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, has experienced too many leadership struggles and difficulties to stick together, as leading non-Brotherhood members have been equivocal about their affiliation with it. And, although it initially sought to rein in its operations, Turkey has been one of the main providers of training and weapons to the FSA (dominated by Brotherhood-affiliated forces), hosting the group's headquarters in Turkey until its decision to move inside Syria in September 2012.

By November 2012, the differences between Washington and Ankara led Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to publicly withdraw support from the SNC, noting that the Syrian "opposition must include people from inside Syria and others who have a legitimate voice that needs to be heard." Subsequently, the United States instead supported the creation in Doha of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a broader coalition that subsumed the SNC, but over which Brotherhood representatives still exert considerable influence.

Yet, Turkey has continued to support the Brotherhood, not least by helping strengthen its position in the FSA. At a December 2012 meeting in the Turkish resort of Antalya, a new united command structure was created for the FSA, two-thirds of which is estimated to be under Brotherhood control.⁸⁶ This support for the Brotherhood and promotion of it within the opposition political and military structures resulted from more than just its ideological affinity with the AKP. It was also a calculated move to further Turkey's interests vis-à-vis Syria's Kurds.

Turkey and Syria's Kurds

The Kurdish question in Syria is intimately connected to Turkey's own Kurdish issue, which is the country's most acute problem. Kurdish clans and tribes overlap the Turkish-Syrian border, resulting in close family ties between the groups as well as feelings of solidarity. After Ankara's previous rapprochement with Damascus led to open borders, these ties only grew stronger.

Moreover, given the developments in the broader region, the future of Syria's Kurds has a direct impact on Turkey's stability. Ankara has already been forced to accept the reality of a self-governing Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. It did so very reluctantly, opening up to Erbil only several years into the AKP's tenure, in what constituted one of the few enduring successes of the "zero problems" policy. Should Syria's Kurds also form a self-governing entity as a result of the ongoing crisis, it would mean that two of Turkey's three neighbors with Kurdish populations—all but Iran—would have some form of limited Kurdish autonomy. At a time when Turkey continues to refuse to offer its Kurds any formal devolution of power,

insisting instead on the unitary structure of the Turkish state, such a development could render Turkey's Kurdish policy unsustainable.

These considerations would normally have been factored into the formulation of Turkish policy on Syria. Yet, when Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu endorsed Assad's ouster in the second half of 2011, the possibility of protracted civil war or state failure—the collapse of Syria's central authority, along the lines of what happened in Iraq following the 2003 invasion—did not seem to be part of their consideration. Instead, Turkey's leaders seem to have viewed Syria in light of the recent events in Libya: as many Western observers did, Turkish leaders fully expected the Assad regime to crumble rapidly. This perception of a regime on the ropes, led Erdoğan to commit the classic mistake of underestimating his opponent. Thus, Turkish policymakers appear to have failed to foresee Assad's inevitable response to their renewed antagonistic stance: rekindling support for the PKK.

Indeed, beginning in late 2011, the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK escalated. With regular ambushes against Turkish troops and ensuing retaliatory attacks, it produced the highest death toll in more than a decade.⁸⁷ This escalation was driven partly by dynamics within Turkey. The AKP government had jailed thousands of Kurdish activists after an aborted opening to the Kurds in 2009, generating considerable frustration among Kurds that boiled over into renewed violence.⁸⁸ Yet it was also clear that the PKK's resurgence was also related to the resumption of outside support.

By the summer of 2012, the Assad regime withdrew from northeastern Syria, making sure to leave the area under the control of the hard-line, PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD). In effect, this meant handing the territory to Turkey's archenemy. Given the extent of prior ties between Damascus and the PKK, it is difficult to believe this move was accidental. More likely, it was the result of an agreement of sorts, whereby Damascus obtained assurances of the PYD's neutrality in the Syrian civil war in return for granting it de facto autonomy.

Ankara's response to Assad's empowerment of the PYD conveys the alarm Turkish leaders must have sensed at this development. On the one hand, Turkey rekindled its peace talks with the PKK. On the other, Turkey appeared to urge rebel groups to target the PYD in northeastern Syria, all the while continuing to pound PKK positions in Turkey's southeast and in Iraq. At first, these measures appear contradictory. Taken together, however, they represent a Turkish strategy to mitigate, or at least defer, the pressures of the Kurdish issue on domestic Turkish politics—especially as Prime Minister Erdoğan was preparing to run for the presidency.

In January 2013, the Turkish government acknowledged being in talks with jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan to find a solution to Turkey's Kurdish problem. While many obstacles remain before Turkey resolves its Kurdish problem, Prime Minister Erdoğan has alleviated, temporarily at least, some of the Kurdish pressures internally—by going further than any

previous government and seeking a dialogue with a terrorist organization that Turkey has vilified for decades.

Meanwhile, Ankara is seeking to limit the impact that developments across the border in Syria's Kurdish regions might have on Turkish politics. It appears to be doing so through a proxy campaign aimed at curtailing the PYD's power. For example, in November 2012, a PYD checkpoint near the Syrian Kurdish town of Ras Al-Ayn, just across the Turkish border, was attacked after Syrian rebels had taken over the town. This prompted a battle that left more than 30 people dead. Skirmishes continued on and off for months. The jihadi forces that attacked the checkpoint belonged either to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Brigade or to a local jihadi group known as the Ahfad Al-Rasoul Brigade. Whoever the attackers were, their wounded were subsequently evacuated to Turkey.

This episode was preceded by warnings from Jordanian officials that arms transiting through Turkey were falling into the hands of jihadi organizations.⁸⁹ Terrorist expert Murad Al-Shishani's research confirms that Turkey has been silently supporting the Ahfad Al-Rasoul Brigade.⁹⁰ In early 2013, there were increasing signals that Turkey was at the very least tolerating Al-Nusra's presence on its territory and refraining from obstructing the group's use of Turkish territory as a rear base for its operations in Syria.

In response, Turkish columnists have come to compare Turkey's role in the conflict with that of Pakistan in the Afghan war.⁹¹ And during Erdoğan's visit to Washington in May 2013, it is clear that the Obama administration strongly leaned on Turkey to cease "all active or passive support" for Al-Nusra.⁹² Following that meeting, Turkey appears to have curtailed its ties with the group.

Ankara's aim to install a proxy regime run by the Muslim Brotherhood in Damascus has gradually come to be overshadowed by the twin reality of the Syrian state disintegrating, spilling conflict and refugees into Turkey, and the Assad regime gaining the upper hand in the conflict against the opposition. Syrian-driven instability has found its way to Turkey through a number of avenues. These include rising sectarian tensions between Turkey's Sunni majority and Alevi minority, as well as violence within Turkey itself, including the Syrian regime's reprisals for Turkey's support for the rebels, which resulted in a pair of car bombings in the town of Reyhanli. These risks, coupled with increasingly vocal domestic opposition to Erdoğan's unpopular Syria policy, have forced Ankara to move beyond its fixation with the impact that the fate of Syria's Kurds will have on Turkish politics. In the fall of 2013, Turkey began taking a more conciliatory stance toward Kurds in Syria, apparently curtailing its support for Al-Nusra against the Kurds and attempting to persuade Syria's Kurdish factions to join forces with the anti-Assad opposition.

Despite this, Turkey is still wary of the PYD, known as the Syrian version of the PKK, and its interim government in Syria. In this respect, Turkey's main ally has become the Kurds of Iraq: the Barzani-led Kurdish Regional Government is no friend of the PKK's, having sought to bring together the disparate Syrian Kurdish tribes in a rival confederation. Yet Barzani is not seen as opposing freedom for Syria's Kurds, either. Therefore, Barzani and other Iraqi

Kurdish voices are pushing Ankara toward some form of concessions toward the PKK to defuse the powder keg.

Hopes of Intervention, Dashed

In the spring of 2013, Prime Minister Erdoğan was a driving force in arguing that the Syrian regime had crossed a red line by using chemical weapons.⁹³ When President Obama began a push for military intervention in Syria following the chemical weapons attack of August 21, Erdoğan was among the cheerleaders. Indeed, he finally seemed to get what he wanted: a U.S.-led military intervention that would provide cover for Turkish intervention and regime change. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdoğan made it clear Turkey opposed the limited strike President Obama was planning—“unbelievably small,” in the words of Secretary of State John Kerry—instead making clear that any intervention should be aimed at overthrowing Assad.⁹⁴ Little wonder, then, that Erdoğan was deeply disappointed by the Russian-brokered deal that halted U.S. plans for a military strike in exchange for Assad’s pledge to give up his arsenal of chemical weapons. He described the deal as “no more than a stalling tactic,”⁹⁵ but was clearly left embarrassed and isolated as a result of the Russian-American deal—a deal that was struck without consulting or involving Turkey.

What Drove Change?

Turkish motivations in Syria are complex: the twists and turns in Turkish policy do not lend themselves to easy conclusions.

Most obviously, Turkey’s initial limited opening to Syria was pragmatic and served the country’s interest in expanding its regional influence and controlling the PKK threat. Given Syria’s role as Turkey’s only Arab neighbor, it was a natural conduit for Turkish interaction with the Arab world. Turkey’s opening to Syria began before the AKP came to power, but the AKP pursued it with much more vigor, and with very different goals, than its predecessors.

Western concerns, by contrast, came to be increasingly disregarded. The AKP leadership appears to have viewed Western isolation of Syria in the decade that preceded the uprising as counterproductive; a view that may, to some extent, have spurred Turkey into action.

Personality was also a factor in Turkey’s decision to back the ouster of its former friend. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu have both spoken publicly about their anger at Assad for ignoring Turkish advice to reform once protests began and for his insincerity in promising certain reforms to his Turkish counterparts only to do the opposite once they had left Damascus.⁹⁶ The prime minister’s famous pride was almost certainly wounded by Assad’s disregard for his initiatives.

As for ideology, it is at first sight a poor explanation for Turkish behavior in Syria. Indeed, the same Turkish leadership first presided over both a warm opening to Syria’s Alawi-dominated, secular, but Iran-aligned regime and then an effort to oust this regime and

replace it with a Muslim Brotherhood–dominated one. Given the significant sectarian and political differences between these two groups, it seems hard to imagine an ideology that could encompass affinity for both. However, it would be a mistake to understand the AKP’s ideology as simply a preference for certain ethno-sectarian or political factions over others.

Instead, the AKP was driven by an ideological vision of Turkey’s rightful political ascendance in the Middle East. Turkey’s Islamic heritage both legitimated this ambition, by establishing its spiritual tie and kinship to peoples ethnically and linguistically distinct from it, and shaped its final objective, a political order founded on religious principles.

Thus, prior to the Arab upheavals and the emergence of a violent sectarian schism in the region, AKP foreign policy sought and was able to engage with all forces in the Muslim world, from Shi’a theocratic Iran and Assad’s Syria to the Sudanese regime and Hamas. This was the essence of Davutoğlu’s ideologically inspired “zero problems” policy: isolation from the West was a more important factor for the AKP than sectarian identity. On the one hand, the AKP saw this as an opening for Turkish influence; on the other, it appeared to relish cultivating regimes that were shunned by the West, and the rapprochement with the Assad regime fit right into this paradigm. In this sense, there was an ideological component in the willingness of the AKP to engage Syria in utter disregard of the policies of its Western allies.

The Syrian conflict, however, caused long-simmering tensions to erupt and caused the AKP’s visions of a pan-Islamic sphere of influence to evaporate. As a result, Turkish foreign policy adapted, finding another avenue by which to pursue the same ideologically driven objectives: a narrower, sectarian approach in which Ankara limited its leadership aspirations to the Sunni bloc and sought to attain them through support for, almost exclusively, the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria, this took the form of siding with the Sunni Islamist element of the resistance to Assad.

The single constants in the policy have been an attempt to extend Turkish influence into Syria and to turn it into a client state. When that goal was best served by cultivating the Assad regime, Ankara did so. However, that strategy no longer proved viable, partly as a result of the regime’s own behavior and partly because the AKP’s ideological affiliates in Syria took up arms against the regime, prompting Ankara to seek regime change instead. By late 2013, that policy appeared to reach a dead end; but no change of policy was in sight.

Iran: A Rivalry Ideology Could Not Overcome

Both Turkey and Iran are heirs to historical empires, making their relations fundamentally different than Turkey's ties with former Ottoman territories such as Syria or Iraq. Their relationship, in its modern form, dates back to the rivalry between the Ottomans and the Safavids, the ethnically Azerbaijani Turkic dynasty that ruled Iran starting in the early 16th century. The similar background of these dynasties contributed to the emphasis both put on religious distinctions. The Ottomans emphasized their Sunni identity, whereas the Safavids made Shi'ism Persia's state religion, a legacy that lasts to this day. Over the following century, the two empires fought several wars, which ended with the establishment of a common border by 1639, one that—with some adjustments—continues to form the basis for Iran's boundaries with modern-day Turkey and Iraq.

Since then, the two countries have been, in the words of one Turkey observer, "occasional allies, but enduring rivals."⁹⁷ While the collapse of both empires in the early 19th century led to brief and abortive attempts on both sides to benefit territorially, their attention was primarily focused on encroaching Western powers rather than on each other. A more stable and positive relationship developed with the ascendance of Kemal Atatürk and Reza Shah to power in Turkey and Iran, respectively. Both leaders were former military men who shared modernizing and secularizing ambitions, a factor that helped reduce the importance of sectarian and geopolitical differences in their bilateral relations. The Cold War further strengthened this sense of commonality, as both countries built their security on ties with the United States and became treaty allies, first in the Baghdad Pact and subsequently in CENTO.

From the Iranian Revolution to the End of the Cold War

The common worldview and strategic orientation that defined Turkish-Iranian relations during the Cold War evaporated following Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Turkey's rulers, civilian as well as military, saw the Islamic regime in Tehran as a threat to its model of secular governance. This view was reinforced by the campaign of abductions and assassinations the new Iranian theocracy undertook against moderate Iranian exiles in Turkey in the 1980s. In addition, Iran sponsored Islamic terrorist groups such as IBDA-C (the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front), which it used to assassinate both Saudi and Israeli diplomats in Turkey in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By 1989, the role of the Iranian embassy in these attacks on Turkish soil had become so obvious that it caused a diplomatic rift: Turkey expelled Iranian Ambassador Manouchehr Mottaki—a future foreign

minister and a contender in the 2013 presidential elections—for his personal involvement in sponsoring terrorism.⁹⁸

Importantly, however, the Milli Görüş movement viewed the Iranian Revolution in an entirely different light. To them, Khomeini's revolution was not a threat but an inspiration, to such a degree that it helped overcome much of the movement's skepticism toward Shi'a Iran.⁹⁹

However, Turkey also benefited strategically and economically from the international community's isolation of Iran following its revolution. With Iran no longer America's primary Middle Eastern ally, Turkey was able to step into that role. Turkey also served as a conduit for arms and goods during the Iran-Iraq war, filling its coffers in the process.

The 1990s: Growing Rivalry

The collapse of the Soviet Union exacerbated Turkish-Iranian antagonism, strengthening their ideological divergence and adding an ethnic dimension to their rivalry.

The emergence of six newly independent Muslim-majority states from the ruins of the Soviet Union coincided with a reinforced focus on secularism within Turkey. The political-military establishment grew concerned that it could no longer control the growth of Turkey's Islamist movement. As the successes of the Welfare Party demonstrated, a virulent anti-establishment strain of political Islam was gaining a life of its own, leading the state to re-emphasize, belatedly, secularism. Thus, when both Turkey and Iran sought to expand their influence among these new states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, a war of political models ensued. The secular Turkish model of a managed democracy was pitted against the theocratic Iranian model. More important was the ethnic aspect, which benefited Turkey as the newly independent states—with the exception of Persian-speaking Tajikistan—were Turkic.

Ultimately, neither Turkey nor Iran was able to exercise much influence in Central Asia. Both established diplomatic and economic ties with regional states, but neither was in a position to challenge the prominence of the heavyweights—Russia, China, and the United States. Furthermore, none of the regional states, having just emerged from decades of subordination to Moscow, was eager to be absorbed into a new "sphere of influence." Nor could either Iran or Turkey claim a natural affinity to any of the former Soviet republics due to cross-cutting ethno-sectarian cleavages: Tajikistan is the sole Persian-speaking country in the region, but, unlike Iran, overwhelmingly Sunni; conversely, Azerbaijan—the country linguistically and geographically closest to Turkey—is predominantly Shi'a, differentiating it from Turkey.

Yet Azerbaijan came to be the most hotly contested arena between Turkey and Iran, due partly to its symbolic value and partly to its geographic position. Symbolically, Azerbaijan is the only Shi'a-majority country to emerge from the Soviet Union's ashes. However, due to a strong tradition of secularism that predated the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan leaned increasingly

in Turkey's direction. Moreover, with Azerbaijani Turks constituting more than a quarter of Iran's population, Tehran was acutely concerned about the possible centrifugal effects a secular, oil-rich Azerbaijani republic could have on Iranian society. While Turkey sought to prop up the faltering Azerbaijani state in the 1990s, Iran instead tried to undermine it, including by providing informal support for Armenia's war with Azerbaijan.

In 2001, Azerbaijan provided the spark for the most acute round of shadow-boxing between Ankara and Tehran. That summer, Iran forcibly expelled an Azerbaijani-flagged exploration ship from disputed waters in the Caspian Sea; it also regularly dispatched military jets over southern Azerbaijani towns. This remains the most notable use of military force in the dispute over access to and control of the Caspian Sea, and tensions were only quelled by a high-profile visit to Baku by the chief of the Turkish general staff, who was accompanied by members of the Turkish Air Force. This visit was a direct response to Iran's gunboat diplomacy, indicating that Turkey had taken Azerbaijan under its protection.¹⁰⁰

During this period, friction between Turkey and Iran was not limited to jockeying for influence in other states. Their bilateral relationship itself was fraught with problems. The main bones of contention were Turkey's relationship with Israel, Iranian interference in Turkey's secular governance, and the PKK.

Turkey's rapprochement with Israel in the 1990s was an obvious irritant to Tehran, which viewed itself, not unfoundedly, as a target of this alignment. Ankara allowed the Israeli Air Force to train over Turkish mountainous territory, which appeared oriented toward preparing for a potential strike on Iran. Indeed, as one author quotes a Turkish official saying, "For Turkey, the agreement is mainly about Syria and the PKK; for Israel, it is more about air-space and Iran."¹⁰¹

In other words, while targeting Iran may not have been Turkey's main motivation in aligning with Israel, Turkey seemed to have no problem with that being Israel's prime motivation. As a result, Iranian officials routinely and vigorously condemned Turkey for its ties to Israel. Most hyperbolic perhaps was Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's statement in April 1997 that through its alignment with Israel, Turkey "had bid farewell to Islamic traditions."¹⁰² That same year, Turkish President Süleyman Demirel walked out of a summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Tehran as a result of the condemnations of Turkey's ties to Israel.¹⁰³

Thus, Tehran was obviously pleased when, in 1997, the Islamist Welfare Party took power in Turkey. Prime Minister Erbakan's decision to make Tehran the destination of his first foreign visit appears to have encouraged Iranian officials to support his rule. However, these efforts to reestablish ties with Iran directly contributed to Erbakan's undoing.

In February 1997, the Iranian ambassador to Turkey took part in a Jerusalem Day event organized by the mayor of the Ankara suburb of Sincan. That in itself was not surprising, given that the event was a tradition started by Imam Khomeini. However, the ambassador proceeded to deliver a fiery speech under posters supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, in which he lambasted Turkey for its ties to Israel and the United States and openly supported the

imposition of sharia in Turkey. He was not alone: Iran's consul general in Istanbul went further, warning that the spread of Islam could not be stopped.¹⁰⁴ This decision by Iranian diplomats to interfere in Turkish domestic affairs plunged bilateral relations to a new low.

Both diplomats were recalled to Tehran following Turkish pressure. Iran's consul general in Erzurum was formally expelled from the country after having declared Deputy Chief of General Staff General Çevik Bir's comment that Iran was a terrorist state "irresponsible." In return, Iran expelled Turkey's ambassador and another diplomat.¹⁰⁵ Turkey's military sent tanks into Sincan following the Jerusalem Day event, arrested the Welfare Party mayor who organized the event, and ultimately ousted Erbakan from power.

But relations between the two countries would deteriorate even further. The Kurdish question, both in Turkey and in Iraq, proved the key bone of contention. Starting in 1995, Tehran and Ankara waged a proxy war of sorts in northern Iraq, backing different Kurdish factions. Turkey, with U.S. backing, supported Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), while Iran allied with Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The struggle between these two factions led to a brief civil war as well as periodic incursions by both Turkish and Iranian military forces.

Moreover, Tehran became the PKK's main sponsor, especially after Ankara forced Syria to relinquish its ties with the Kurdish terrorist group. During Turkish incursions into northern Iraq, Iran did nothing to prevent PKK militants from seeking refuge in Iranian territory and even appeared to host leading PKK commanders. In February 1999, the PKK held its annual congress in the Iranian city of Urmia.¹⁰⁶ That July, Turkey bombed Iranian territory just beyond the Turkish border, triggering another diplomatic standoff. Not only did Turkish officials accuse Iran of aiding the PKK, they also argued, with considerable evidence, that Iran sponsored Turkish Hezbollah, a Kurdish Islamist group unrelated to its Lebanese namesake.

As is typical for Turkish-Iranian relations, however, neither state allowed these serious incidents to spiral out of control. Diplomatic relations remained intact and economic ties continued to develop. Moreover, during leftist intellectual Ismail Cem's tenure as Turkish foreign minister (1997–2002), relations with Iran began to improve. Cem sought to strengthen Turkey's ties with Middle Eastern states and launched the idea of a "Neighborhood Forum" for this purpose—a limited precursor of sorts to Davutoğlu's "zero problems" policy.¹⁰⁷ Cem visited Iran in February 1997, followed in 2002 by President Sezer. Thus, as in the Syrian case, the improving relationship between the countries preceded the AKP's advent to power, and, similarly, it was facilitated by the capture of Öcalan and the resulting unilateral PKK cease-fire in September 1999, a development in which the U.S. intelligence community played a significant, if underappreciated, role.

The AKP and Iran

Much as in the Syrian case, the AKP's rise to power brought new energy and direction to the Turkish-Iranian relationship. But, unlike the Syrian case, here the AKP sought to openly

embrace a country that had been a long-standing rival. Moreover, whereas Turkey's Kemalist elite had traditionally regarded Iran with suspicion and hostility, the AKP leadership, as a result of Iran's Islamic Revolution, held it in a certain esteem.¹⁰⁸ Thus, it occupied a natural place in Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's "zero-problem" policy, but one that took time to develop. The AKP's ties to Iran went through three distinct phases: first, a period of gradual warming focused on the PKK issue, from 2003 to 2007; second, the AKP's intense cultivation of Tehran, from 2008 to 2011; and third, the relationship's collapse into acrimony primarily over Syria, from 2011 to the present.

RAPPROCHEMENT AND THE PKK: 2003–2007

Turkey's struggle against the PKK took center-stage in the evolution of its relations with Iran, just as with Syria. On this issue, in a strange twist, Iran and the United States reversed their customary positions in 2003. Traditionally, the United States had been a key ally of Turkey on the PKK issue, going so far as to pressure European states to curtail PKK activities on their soil. Iran, by contrast, had been a sponsor of the PKK. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, flipped this order on its head.

Ankara's failure, on March 1, 2003, to permit the use of Turkish territory for a ground attack on Iraq, led to a sharp decline in Turkish-U.S. relations. Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran came to share concerns about the impact of the U.S. invasion: particularly that it would lead to the breakup of Iraq and the creation of an independent Kurdish state, which could, in turn, destabilize the Kurdish regions of both Turkey and Iran.

Although Iraq remained territorially intact, the continued U.S. presence there nevertheless negatively impacted, at least at first, Turkey and Iran's ability to deal with their Kurdish uprisings. In June 2004, the PKK ended its five-year cease-fire and began new attacks on Turkish military and civilian targets. This gradual uptick in violence coincided with the creation of the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) in 2006, a PKK affiliate fighting the Iranian government with increasing vigor. However, during this period of deteriorating security, the United States, which was effectively in sovereign control of Iraq, refused to allow Turkey to attack PKK bases in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq.

Turkey's refusal to participate in the war had angered many of its traditional friends in Washington and ensured that CENTCOM officials did not see helping Turkey against the PKK as a priority. Instead, the U.S. government's chief concern was to maintain stability in northern Iraq, the only calm area in the country—a calm American officials feared Turkish strikes would upset. From a Turkish perspective, however, this was both a betrayal by an ally and a case of Western double standards: the United States demanded full cooperation in its war against Al-Qaeda terrorists but refused to help Turkey target PKK terrorism, which was costing hundreds of Turkish lives a year.

Iran, on the other hand, offered Turkey high-level military and intelligence cooperation against their common PKK-PJAK enemy. Iranian officials also accused the United States of directly supporting PJAK, and implicitly the PKK, accusations that Turkish officials appear to have taken at face value. The resulting Turkish-Iranian coordination—including bombings by

Iranian jets of PJAK-PKK camps in the Qandil mountains of Iraq—stood in stark contrast to America’s refusal to cooperate with its erstwhile ally.

Matters were made worse by the fact that U.S.-made arms ended up in PKK hands and were used in attacks on Turkey. Thus, even the Turkish military, historically very suspicious of Iran, began to warm to Tehran as its views of the United States soured.

This state of affairs lasted until the U.S. surge succeeded in stabilizing Iraq in 2007. With this concern addressed, the United States was once again willing to allow Turkish air strikes in Iraq and intelligence-sharing with Turkey on PKK locations. But the damage had been done: to most Turks, the perverse reality was that Iran proved a better ally against terrorism than the United States. Public opinion polls mirror this evolution. By the mid-2000s, more than half of Turks had a favorable opinion of Iran, while the United States was down in the single digits.¹⁰⁹

It was also at this time that Turkish-Iranian trade started building momentum. In the 1990s, bilateral trade had been flat at less than \$1 billion in total value; from 2003, it started growing rapidly. The commercial relationship was heavily tilted in Iran’s favor, given that Iranian oil and gas exports to Turkey comprise the lion’s share of Turkish-Iranian trade. But Turkish exports to Iran began rising rapidly as well, passing the billion-dollar mark in 2006 and reaching \$3.5 billion in 2011.¹¹⁰

THE AKP’S CULTIVATION OF IRAN: 2008–2011

On this foundation of limited security cooperation and burgeoning trade, the AKP sought to build a close relationship with Iran. These efforts coincided both with the appointment of Davutoğlu, a proponent of Turkish activity in international hotspots, as Turkey’s foreign minister as well as growing international controversy over Iran’s nuclear program. Nor is it coincidental that the ties between Ankara and Tehran warmed at the same time as the Turkish-Israeli relationship collapsed. As a result, Turkey became involved in the Iranian nuclear issue and began increasingly siding, seemingly, with Iran, especially as Ankara remained unperturbed by the internal unrest that followed Iran’s 2009 presidential election.

Iran’s Nuclear Program

Turkey’s stance on the Iranian nuclear program has attracted considerable attention. In mid-2008, Ankara offered to mediate between the main parties involved—Iran and the P5+1 group, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China) and Germany.¹¹¹ Erdoğan and his associates, however, strayed from their stated objective to act as a go-between and instead became increasingly outspoken defenders of Iran’s nuclear program.

In a speech in Washington in November 2008, Prime Minister Erdoğan urged nuclear weapons powers to abolish their own arsenals before meddling with Iran.¹¹² Following a visit to Tehran in October 2009, Erdoğan stated: "I think that those who take this stance, who want these arrogant sanctions, need to first give these [weapons] up. We shared this opinion with our Iranian friends, our brothers." Thus, he appeared to lend legitimacy to the

Iranian regime and its nuclear ambitions, rather than exerting pressure on it to comply with its international obligations.

Turkish leaders then began publicly juxtaposing the issue of Israeli nuclear weapons with Iran's covert program.¹¹³ In particular, Prime Minister Erdoğan repeatedly castigated Western powers for focusing on Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program while ignoring Israel's assumed possession of nuclear weapons. As Gareth Jenkins has observed, "Erdoğan appeared sincerely convinced that Iran was solely interested in acquiring nuclear energy and had no weapons ambitions."¹¹⁴ That said, it should be noted that Turkey continued to largely abide by U.N. sanctions on Iran, occasionally forcing Iranian planes with suspect cargo to land.

As the controversy heightened, Turkey moved from mediating to taking sides. In November 2009, it abstained from a sanctions resolution in the International Atomic Energy Agency against Iran that both Moscow and Beijing supported.¹¹⁵ In June 2010, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made their well-publicized coup. On the eve of a U.N. Security Council vote on a new round of sanctions against Iran, in a display of defiance, they appeared in Tehran holding hands with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and announced an alternative diplomatic proposal to handle the Iranian nuclear issue.¹¹⁶ The news fell on deaf ears: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rejected the deal and the Security Council went on to pass new sanctions anyway. While this debacle was at least partly due to miscommunications among American, Turkish, and Brazilian leaders, it nevertheless made clear that, much to the considerable chagrin of Western leaders, Ankara had become Tehran's most valuable international supporter.

Reaction to 2009 Elections

That support had already become evident when, in June 2009, Turkey barely blanched as the Iranian presidential elections degenerated into acrimony and violence. Ahmadinejad's reelection was highly suspicious, with the supreme leader declaring him the winner with an improbable margin that did not correspond to polls taken before the elections.¹¹⁷

Turkish leaders did not seem troubled—both President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan called to congratulate Ahmadinejad within days of his reelection, making them among the first world leaders to do so.¹¹⁸ It also made them among the very few: by the end of June, only six countries had officially congratulated Ahmadinejad, putting Turkey in the company of Syria, Russia, China, and Venezuela.¹¹⁹ Afghanistan also joined the list, though as a neighbor with somewhat fraught relations with Iran, its motivations differed from the others.

Moreover, Turkish leaders maintained their support even after the contested election turned into bloody suppression of peaceful protests against electoral fraud. In a June 22 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu made this somewhat surreal comment about the protests: "I think that we should take this as a sign that the political process in Iran is very healthy," also making it clear that "we must leave the discussion of the issue to the Iranians. We cannot intervene from the outside."¹²⁰

The next day, referring to the violent crackdown, Davutoğlu said, “We truly hope that the dynamic and well-attended political election will not be shadowed by the recent developments.”¹²¹ In an October 2009 interview with *The Guardian*, Prime Minister Erdoğan made it clear that he had no regrets, stating that he would not raise the post-election violence on his upcoming trip to Iran, since that would imply “interference” in Iran’s internal affairs.¹²² As late as February 2010, standing alongside Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in Ankara, Davutoğlu stated that “we consider the elections democratic and, in terms of the people’s turnout, a positive development.”¹²³

In this way, Turkey’s stance went beyond noninterference in Iranian internal affairs, and whether deliberately or not, instead became a direct endorsement of Ahmadinejad, a crucial extension of support at the Iranian leader’s most vulnerable moment. As the Istanbul-based correspondent Andrew Finkel observed, this made Turkey’s position very different from that of President Obama’s, who also decided not to interfere in the Iranian elections: “it is one thing not to interfere. It is another to pretend to like what you see.”¹²⁴

Missile Defense, Syria, and the Turn to Hostility

Turkey’s active cultivation of Iran began to raise concerns in the United States and some European countries about Turkey’s reliability as a NATO ally. The climax of this controversy turned out to be the November 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon, which was dominated by the question of missile defense. Prior to the summit, Turkish leaders had threatened to block the deployment of a NATO missile defense shield in Europe, leading to fears that Turkish-Western relations could unravel completely as a result.

Turkey’s opposition to NATO missile defense deployment was due to several factors. First, Turkey wanted to refrain from naming any specific countries as threats—especially Iran and Syria, since doing so would compromise Turkey’s “zero problems” policy. Second, Turkish officials wanted the shield to be NATO-controlled and to cover the entire NATO territory—and not simply be an extension of U.S. missile defense. Third, Turkey wanted to be included in decision-making regarding the use of facilities on Turkish territory.¹²⁵ Finally, Turkey reportedly sought, and received, assurances that no data gathered by the radar would be shared with Israel.¹²⁶

Despite a shouting match between President Gül and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, participants were able to reach a compromise deal that satisfied Turkish concerns while allowing the missile defense shield to be implemented. Ankara managed to get a critical concession—no target countries were named—though it seemed purely semantic; no one, including Iran, was under any illusion regarding the actual reasons for the deployment of the shield. Thus, Turkey’s eventual decision to support the deal displeased Tehran, although it did not lead to an immediate worsening of relations.

Instead, that downturn in Turkish-Iranian relations came following the Arab upheavals, particularly as the two countries’ positions began to diverge on the Syria crisis and as U.S.-Turkish relations deepened once more. By the late spring of 2011, Turkey began to distance

itself from the Assad regime, urging it to adopt meaningful reform, while also allowing the Syrian opposition to hold meetings in Turkey. Around the same time, Iranian officials decided to throw their weight unconditionally behind Assad. As one writer has observed, by summer 2011, Iran had also made it clear that if forced to choose between Turkey and Syria, it would choose Syria.¹²⁷

Yet Ankara appeared not to have considered the implications of Iran's deep rapport with Assad, and things proceeded downhill from there: in September 2011, after a personal intervention of President Obama with Prime Minister Erdoğan, as well as a visit to Turkey by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Turkey signed a bilateral agreement with the United States on the deployment of the Army Navy/Transportable Radar Surveillance System (AN/TPY-2) in Kürecik, Malatya, as part of NATO's missile defense shield.¹²⁸ The Iranian reaction was swift and strong. In early October, Ahmadinejad criticized the deployment as intended to protect Israel and said Iran had conveyed its displeasure to Turkey.¹²⁹ In November, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Air Force commander General Amir Ali Hajizadeh stated that Iran would hit the radars in Malatya if Israel or the United States attacked Iran.¹³⁰ As evidenced by the need for high-level U.S. intervention to clinch the deal, Turkey appears to have been reluctant to proceed, well aware of the implications for its relationship with Iran. But it eventually did make that choice.

When Turkey made itself a leading backer of the effort to overthrow Assad, the relationship became outright confrontational. Mutual recriminations between high officials became commonplace, with Turks accusing Iranians of supporting the butchering of civilians and Iranians accusing Turks of serving the interests of the United States and Israel in Syria. Most notably perhaps, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç rhetorically asked of Iran in February 2012 whether "you are worthy of being called Islamic ... have you said a single thing about what is happening in Syria?"¹³¹

In September 2012, Turkey refused to attend the Tehran summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, unlike Erdoğan's ally Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi. Ahmadinejad blasted Turkey for requesting and receiving the deployment of NATO Patriot missiles in southeastern Turkey in late 2012 and canceled a scheduled December 2012 visit to Turkey.¹³² Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Arınç stated in late August 2012 that Turkey was investigating Iran's possible role in supporting the PKK.¹³³ In December, Turkish Interior Minister Idris Naim Şahin provided detailed accusations of Iran sheltering PKK units and allowing wounded fighters to be treated in Iranian state hospitals.¹³⁴

What Drove Change?

The roller-coaster ride in Turkish-Iranian relations is reminiscent of the Syrian case, with the considerable distinction that it stemmed not from active Turkish policies directed at Iran, but instead from Iran's reaction to Turkish policies on Syria, Iraq, and NATO's missile defense. Notably, in this case the AKP seemed unable to anticipate or understand why its policies—which clearly conflicted with Iranian interests—would trigger a negative reaction in Tehran and compromise its efforts to build an unprecedentedly warm relationship.

At the most basic level, it is clear that Ankara's Iran policy was determined without much if any regard for the views of its Western allies. This approach triggered alarm and anger among NATO members, and led to intense pressure that forced the AKP to make a choice on a critical issue. Turkey's decision to accept NATO missile defense in December 2010—which Ankara knew would cause difficulties with Iran—indicated that Turkey's policymaking had become more independent from its past coordination with Western allies, but the NATO alliance was still an important consideration when Ankara had to make a choice. In other words, despite the AKP's warm embrace of Iran, Turkish policy toward Iran still had a clear pragmatic element.

This conclusion is supported by the only continuity found in Turkey's Iran policy: the PKK issue. While Iran's stance toward the PKK is intimately connected with many other factors, it is a key index of Turkish-Iranian relations. Still, it is unclear whether Iran's stance toward the PKK is a cause or consequence of the temperature of its relationship with Turkey. On the one hand, it is clear that the warming of Turkish-Iranian relations from 2003 through 2007 was directly caused by the change in Iran's policy toward the PKK. On the other hand, Turkish-Iranian relations had begun to sour almost a year before Turkish officials would hint at an Iranian role in supporting the PKK. Here, Iran's change of heart on the PKK appears to have been a consequence of the deteriorating relationship—it was a means by which to quash Turkey's Syria policy and to make deployment of the NATO missile defense shield more costly. In other words, Iran was retaliating against Turkey for measures that were understood as targeting Tehran.

As for the often-cited claim that Turkey's policies from 2008 to 2011 were a result of frustration with the West, this claim is only of limited use in explaining the Iranian case. Prime Minister Erdoğan's rhetoric on the Iranian nuclear program betrayed a resentment of what he viewed as a biased non-proliferation regime.

More useful is the notion of growing Turkish confidence and ambition to carve out a considerable role for itself on the international scene, particularly in the Middle East. Indeed, Turkey's cultivation of Iran appeared intended, to a considerable extent, to position Ankara to facilitate a grand bargain between Washington and Tehran, something that would greatly enhance Turkey's prestige and make it a formidable power in the region. Similarly, the souring of relations is also partially linked to Turkey's activism on Syria and Prime Minister Erdoğan's unprecedented move to make Turkey a leading force for regime change in a neighboring country. Thus, Turkish aspirations for regional leadership and the poor strategic underpinnings of this ambition can explain part of the ups and downs with Iran.

However, the evolution of Turkish policies suggests that Ankara's friendly attitude to Iran was not reciprocated: the rapprochement was largely one-sided. Furthermore, it seems the Turkish government failed to realize the extent to which Tehran, unlike itself, continued to view Turkish-Iranian relations as a rivalry in the Middle East. Thus, the AKP leadership was not prepared for the vehemence with which Tehran turned on Ankara when Turkey lent its support to the Syrian opposition, thus threatening Assad's chief international protégé, Bashar Al-Assad.

On the face of it, the Iranian case would seem to reject the notion of an ideological slant to Turkish foreign policy. If the AKP warmed to Iran for reasons of Islamic ideology, how could that possibly explain the subsequent collapse of relations? Iran's theocracy had not faltered during this period, after all. However, it would be too simplistic to understand AKP ideology as just Islamist affinity. A deeper examination suggests three separate ideological currents at play in Turkish-Iranian relations: Third Worldism, Islamic unity, and sectarianism.

First, Prime Minister Erdoğan's stance on the Iranian nuclear program was driven, at least in part, by his resentment of the nuclear non-proliferation regime—in other words, a form of Third Worldism. His position was novel in Turkey, which had never previously expressed principal opposition to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Under his leadership Turkey joined hands with Brazil, which harbored a strong opposition to joining the NPT in 1998 on the grounds of its discriminatory nature, allowing some countries to have nuclear weapons while prohibiting them to others.¹³⁵ In this sense, the Prime Minister displayed a classic anti-Western ideological bent—but one as much identified with the Latin American left as with Islamism.

However, other ideological factors appear to have contributed to the rise and fall of Turkish-Iranian ties. Turkey's warming to Tehran took place under the heading of "zero problems," a policy that aimed mainly at improving Turkey's relations with the Muslim Middle East, irrespective of sectarian orientations. Turkey was clearly the driving force in this warming; Tehran reciprocated in words, but scarcely in deeds. For example, in the economic sphere, Iran did far less to accommodate Turkish businesses than vice versa.¹³⁶ Moreover, the optimism about the potential for close relations was not mutual: the Iranian government, strongly grounded in Iranian nationalism, from the outset appeared concerned that a more Islamic Turkey would be a potential rival for influence in the Muslim world.¹³⁷

By contrast, until 2011, Turkish leaders did not appear to see a potential rivalry. This dovetails with the romanticism about Islamic unity that permeates Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's early work; it also corresponds to the emphasis on Islamic unity that the Milli Görüş movement adopted from the Brotherhood. Thus, Turkey's efforts to cultivate good relations with Iran from 2008 to 2010 could be seen in part as stemming from an unrealistic belief in pan-Islamism and an underestimation of the sectarian and nationalistic perspective of Iran's leaders. These ideologically driven beliefs led the AKP to underestimate the relevance of the long-standing Turkish-Iranian geopolitical rivalry and the differing national interests that underpinned it.

In contrast, the souring of relations from 2011 to the present corresponds with Turkish foreign policy moving in a sectarian, Sunni direction. It occurred, of course, simultaneously with Turkey's increasingly sectarian approach to Syria, in which Turkish leaders not only backed the Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Syria as well as more extreme Sunni elements, but also failed to even give lip service to the rights of non-Sunni minorities in Syria. Moreover, it coincided with the worsening of Turkish relations with the Shi'a-dominated and increasingly sectarian Nouri Al-Maliki regime in Iraq, as Turkey made itself the explicit supporter of the Sunni Arabs, as well as Sunni Kurds, in Iraq.

In sum, the AKP's pan-Islamist ideological outlook prevented Turkey's leadership from correctly predicting Tehran's growing hostility to Ankara. In this way, Turkey's souring of relations with Iran was largely unintended, a consequence of ideological blinders that led Ankara to underestimate the potential for an enduring rivalry with Iran and to ignore how its policies—being hostile toward Iranian allies, and aiming to increase Turkish influence—might be viewed in Tehran.

Israel and Gaza: The AKP Returns to Its Roots

A defining element of Turkey's foreign policy in the 1990s was the development of its close strategic relationship with Israel. That relationship remade the political map of the Middle East and provided Turkey with great advantages. When it came to power in 2002, the AKP did not refrain from public criticism of Israel, foreshadowing problems that would arise later, but nor did it initially challenge the Turkish-Israeli relationship it inherited. But the 2008 Gaza war triggered a rapid deterioration of the relationship, which was further exacerbated by the 2010 Gaza flotilla incident—whereby a convoy of ships, led by the *Mavi Marmara*, operated by a Turkish Islamist charity, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), sought to break the blockade of Gaza, only to be stopped by Israeli commandos.

The AKP used these incidents to undo the Turkish-Israeli relationship. While the Syria conflict and a direct intervention by President Obama may help partially normalize the relationship, Turkey and Israel will not return to the close relationship they had in the 1990s. Understanding the motivations for Turkey's changing policies toward Israel and the Palestinians is key to any broader analysis of the evolution of Turkish policies.

Turkey and the Middle East Conflict During the Cold War

Turkey's policy toward Israel and the Palestinian question during the Cold War was nuanced. It sought to develop relations with the Jewish state while maintaining ties to Arab countries and retaining support at home, despite domestic sympathy for the Palestinian cause.

Turkey recognized Israel in 1949 and gradually established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state, but the relationship would fluctuate with the ups and downs of Arab-Israeli relations. At several instances, Turkey did downgrade its diplomatic representation in Israel. This happened during the 1956 Suez crisis, for example, under the reign of Turkish conservative Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. It also happened in November 1980, after Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, when Turkey's military government downgraded ties to the level of second secretary. In 1991, officially citing "positive developments in Israeli-Palestinian relations following the Madrid Conference," Turkey simultaneously upgraded relations with both Israel and the Palestinian entity to the ambassadorial level.¹³⁸

While this was the official story, a parallel and more informal dimension of relations had already developed early on. The two countries established discreet security and intelligence cooperation in the late 1950s, which endured amid the ups and downs of the formal relationship. The origins of this informal relationship date back to August 1958, two years after Prime Minister Menderes had downgraded the diplomatic relationship. Following the

Iraqi revolution, which concerned Turkey so much that Menderes reportedly advocated for a Turkish military intervention to restore the pro-Western regime,¹³⁹ Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion paid a secret visit to Turkey, in which he and Menderes agreed to a secret pact in which Turkey essentially joined Israel's "Periphery Alliance," an anti-Arab coalition that also included Iran and Ethiopia. As Turkey expert Philip Robins observes, "The cognitive convergence that this represents identifies it as the high water mark of Israeli-Turkish relations over their first four decades."¹⁴⁰ While this pact came to nothing, in part because of the 1960 military coup in Turkey, it set a pattern: it was Turkey's center-right leaders, simultaneously courting Turkey's religious conservatives and the West, who would promote closer Turkish-Israeli relations. In this, Menderes would be followed by Turgut Özal and Süleyman Demirel. By contrast, the Turkish secular left, symbolized by Bülent Ecevit, was always more hostile to Israel. Regardless of who was in power, until the mid-1990s, Turkish-Israeli ties exhibited what Amikam Nachmani, quoting Ben-Gurion, calls the "mistress syndrome," where Turkey refused to acknowledge the extent of its ties with Israel.¹⁴¹

Turkey's relations with the Palestinians were also nuanced. On the one hand, Turkey consistently advocated for the rights of the Palestinians and publicly criticized Israel when it felt Israel was repressing those rights. On the other, Turkey consistently urged moderation at summits of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and other forums whenever Arab states and Iran urged harsh denunciations of Israel or severing relations with the Jewish state. Moreover, Turkey's pro-Palestinian stance did not translate into an embrace of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which supported the Greek position on Cyprus and which Turkey viewed as complicit in the training of anti-Turkish terrorist groups, be they Armenian, Kurdish, or leftist. Thus, Ankara did not recognize the PLO until joining the OIC in 1976 and did not let it establish an office in Turkey until 1979.¹⁴² Turkey recognized Palestinian statehood in 1988, but Palestinian diplomatic representation in Ankara remained at the *chargé d'affaires* level until the joint upgrade of ties with both the Palestinians and Israel in 1991. Needless to say, during this time Turkey stayed clear of any dealings with Hamas.

Rise of the Turkish-Israeli Entente

The Turkish-Israeli entente arose in the mid-1990s as a result of the new regional paradigm that emerged after the end of the Cold War. But the seeds had been sown in the late 1980s, under the Motherland Party government of Turgut Özal. One of his top priorities was to strengthen and deepen U.S.-Turkish ties, especially following the dip in relations that had resulted from military rule. President Özal was keenly aware of the importance of the pro-Israel lobby in the United States and appears to have modulated relations with Israel in part to accommodate it. Indeed, Özal went to great lengths to mitigate his image as a pro-Arab politician—an image that had developed among American Jewish circles. To neutralize that perception, he dispatched influential members of the Turkish Jewish community to the United States, and, during a state visit to the United States in 1985, the Turkish foreign minister took the opportunity to meet with Israel's ambassador to the United States.

Meanwhile, Özal met with a delegation of American Jewish organizations. This established a precedent that would only be broken by Erdoğan after the collapse of the Turkish-Israeli relationship in 2010.

In 1986, Turkey upgraded its representation in Israel from the level of second secretary to *chargé d'affaires*.¹⁴³ The next year, newly appointed Foreign Minister Mesut Yılmaz met with a visiting delegation from the American Jewish Congress and sought to enlist it to advocate for Turkey in the U.S. Congress. In all these encounters, Turkish leaders were undoubtedly advised that the most important concern for Jewish organizations was the improvement of Turkey's relations with Israel.¹⁴⁴

This episode sheds light on some of Turkey's early motives for the improvement of relations with Israel, and thus on reasons for Turkey's initiative in the Middle East in the 1990s: they were to a significant extent related not to the Middle East itself, but to Turkey's alliance with the United States and the troubles Ankara faced with anti-Turkish lobbying groups in Washington. Significantly, fearful of negative domestic reactions, President Özal tried to keep his meeting with Jewish groups in the United States under the radar, although they were leaked to the Turkish press. Indeed, Turkish opinion on the Palestinian issue remained a major concern for Turkish leaders. Thus, the importance of the peace process to Turkey's ability to deepen the Turkish-Israeli relationship cannot be overestimated. It was the October 1991 Madrid Conference that provided Turkey with a rationale for fully upgrading its diplomatic relationship with Israel. Similarly, the Oslo Accord of 1993, followed by the Taba Talks agreement in 1995, at least temporarily removed the Palestinian issue as an impediment for deepening Turkish-Israeli relations.

By that time, the strategic rationale for the relationship was well understood on both sides: both countries shared common foes in Syria and Iran. Turkey in particular needed to pressure Syria to cease supporting PKK terrorism. To do so, it required the support of pro-Israeli forces in both the United States and Europe, which it was able to receive. It also stood to benefit from military and intelligence cooperation with Israel. As for Israel, Turkey was the flagship of its relationships with Muslim-majority countries, helping to dispel the perception of regional isolation. Moreover, Israel gained vitally important access to Turkey's airspace—for air force training purposes. Previously able to train mainly over water, Israel was now able to train over terrain that resembled Syria, Iraq, and Iran.¹⁴⁵

In the period between 1996 and 1998, the Turkish-Israeli relationship blossomed in a very public manner. The two nations publicly acknowledged their military and intelligence cooperation and signed several treaties in civilian areas. While trade and tourism developed rapidly, security and military affairs formed the cornerstone of the relationship—Turkey's Deputy Chief of Staff General Çevik Bir once called the public relationship only “the tip of the iceberg.”

Remarkably, much of the relationship was established during the tenure of Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan. This was, of course, in spite of Erbakan's wishes. Indeed, in the electoral campaign preceding his election, he had referred to then-Prime Minister Tansu

Çiller (subsequently his coalition partner) as “Israel’s puppet,” talked of “liberating Jerusalem,” and suggested that voters had to choose between a “Greater Israel or a Greater Turkey.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, while Erbakan’s restraint in power is sometimes construed as pragmatism or even moderation, his pre-election rhetoric makes it clear he had not moderated at all. Instead, it is mainly indicative of the tight grip the military continued to have on Turkish foreign and security policy.

Indeed, an Israeli official asked of Erbakan’s decision to sign a defense deal with Israel: “is Erbakan a pragmatist if the army puts a gun to his head and tells him to sign?”¹⁴⁷ Even before being forced out, Erbakan was overshadowed by Turkish President Süleyman Demirel, the former leader of the center-right True Path Party, who was a strong advocate of the relationship with Israel. Demirel visited Israel in early 1996, signing a free trade agreement and addressing the Knesset. In 1999, he reportedly told Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak that Turkey had the will and political ability to deepen the relationship “as far as Israel is prepared to go.”¹⁴⁸

Turkey reaped significant benefits from the entente. Its success in forcing Damascus to expel PKK leader Öcalan and cease supporting the PKK would hardly have been thinkable without Israel: indeed, thanks to the Turkish-Israeli rapprochement, Syria felt squeezed from two sides when Turkey turned up the heat and threatened military action in 1998. Even more concretely, Israel directly contributed in the apprehension of Öcalan in Kenya in February 1999. Additionally, defense ties with Israel proved crucial for military procurement, especially given the difficulties Turkey faced in obtaining equipment from the United States and Europe. And finally, Turkey essentially acquired an effective and devoted lobby among the pro-Israel forces in the United States.

These developments sent shockwaves across the region, realigning politics in the Middle East. In 1998, the Arab League called the Turkish-Israeli relationship “an attempt to redraw the political map of the Middle East.” The same year, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa stated, “Turkey must know that any alliance [with Israel] will trigger the establishment of a counter-alliance.”¹⁴⁹ While no such counter-alliance materialized, the Turkish-Israeli entente had the effect of bringing Syria and Iran closer together. Also, the second intifada created some difficulties, as it regenerated strong pro-Palestinian sentiments in Turkey. Indeed, center-left Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in 2002 referred to Israeli policies as “genocidal,” a comment for which he subsequently was forced to profusely apologize.¹⁵⁰ However, these downsides paled in comparison to the advantages Turkey reaped from the relationship with Israel.

The AKP’s First Term: Ambivalence

The AKP’s victory at the polls in 2002 caused some concern in Israel, especially given Erdoğan’s Islamist past. Moreover, unlike with Erbakan, there was no secular party in coalition to balance the AKP, which enjoyed a majority of its own in the parliament. Israel’s fears were quickly allayed, as Prime Minister Erdoğan did little to jeopardize the relationship during his first term in power. Immediately upon the AKP’s election, he promised Jewish

groups in the United States that he favored continuing and possibly expanding the relationship with Israel.¹⁵¹

Still, there were some early warning signs of what was to come. In 2004, Prime Minister Erdoğan called Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Sheikh Yasin "state terrorism," generating a rebuke from Israel. He also compared Israeli policies toward the Palestinians to the Spanish inquisition, explicitly stating that "the people of Israel are treating the Palestinians as they were treated 500 years ago."¹⁵² In 2005, however, he visited Israel and the Palestinian territories—the first visit by a Turkish prime minister since Tansu Çiller in 1994—as well as Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem. The visit was generally positive, the only minor breach of protocol being Prime Minister Erdoğan's refusal to don a Jewish skullcap at Yad Vashem.¹⁵³ During the visit, he spoke critically of Iran's nuclear ambitions and termed anti-Semitism a crime against humanity.¹⁵⁴

Signs of the forthcoming decay in the relationship, however, were also evident. In spite of Erdoğan's protestations, the AKP government failed to stem, and occasionally abetted, a rising tide of anti-Semitism in Turkish media and society, which developed alongside the growing anti-Americanism that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. At this time, among the best-selling books in Turkey were Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The biggest blockbuster movie in Turkish history, the 2006 *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, depicted American soldiers as Christian fundamentalists engaging in organ-trafficking, alongside American Jewish doctors. Far from distancing themselves from the film, leading AKP representatives including then speaker of parliament Bülent Arınç and Prime Minister Erdoğan's wife, Emine, attended its premiere and praised its veracity.¹⁵⁵

The most significant initiative to take place during the AKP's first term, and a harbinger of things to come, was Ankara's opening to Hamas. In January 2006, Prime Minister Erdoğan greeted Hamas's election victory positively and urged the world to respect what he termed the democratic choice of the Palestinian people. The AKP rejected the West's position that Hamas must renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist as a precondition for engagement. Instead, Erdoğan compared Hamas to Turkish Islamist parties, even though the latter never supported violence to achieve their goals.¹⁵⁶ A month after Hamas's electoral victory, Turkey helped confer legitimacy on it by hosting a delegation led by Hamas leader Khaled Mesha'al in Ankara.¹⁵⁷ At the time, the AKP leadership tried to keep the visit discreet—it is notable that the Hamas leaders were invited by the AKP, not by the Turkish government—but this did not soothe Israelis' feelings.¹⁵⁸

During the 2006 Lebanon war, Prime Minister Erdoğan harshly criticized Israel, implicitly siding with Hezbollah and warning that nobody should expect Turkey to remain neutral. Several AKP parliamentarians went further, accusing Israel of war crimes and equating its actions with the Holocaust.¹⁵⁹ From that point onward, anti-Semitic themes crept into the mainstream of Turkish media, particularly in television shows and in the reporting of the Islamist AKP mouthpiece *Yeni Şafak*.¹⁶⁰ Coupled with the lack of government reaction, this allowed anti-Semitism to permeate Turkish society. As a result, the Pew Research Center

documents negative feelings against Jews in Turkey rising from 49 percent in 2004 to 76 percent in 2008.¹⁶¹

Turkish support for Hamas increased after the Hamas-Fatah civil war that left Hamas with control of the Gaza Strip. Following the conflict, Turkey actively tried to insert itself in the mediation process between the rival Palestinian factions—an effort in which it was only moderately successful, if at all.¹⁶² Ankara's warming ties with Hamas irked Fatah. While Hamas representatives praised Turkey's role, and some talks were held in Turkey, Ankara found itself unable to dislodge Arab powers from their roles as facilitators. Especially after the Egyptian revolution in 2011, Ankara proved unable to compete with Egypt as a mediator.¹⁶³

Gaza and the Fall of the Entente

As the AKP grew more confident in its foreign policy following its reelection in 2007, so too did it become a more vocal critic of Israel and advocate for the Palestinian cause. Indeed, during the AKP's second term, Prime Minister Erdoğan and his government displayed fewer inhibitions, as Turkish rhetoric on a number of issues grew more assertive.

Still, despite its effort to increase its influence in the Arab world, until the Gaza war of 2008 to 2009 Turkey tried to straddle the line and sought a balance between its relationship with Israel and its support for the Palestinians. Thus, even after Turkey's vocal criticism of Israel during the 2006 war in Lebanon, Turkey hosted several rounds of talks between Israel and Syria in 2007 and 2008 and sought to play a role as a mediator and facilitator in the broader Middle East conflict.¹⁶⁴ The conflict in Gaza, however, played a critical role in bringing the end of this attempt at balance and spelled the downfall of the Turkish-Israeli relationship.

On the one hand, the conflict tested the AKP government's balance between relations with Israel and its warming to Hamas. On the other, it interfered with its long-sought role in the Middle East, spelling an end to the Syrian-Israeli talks Turkey was hosting. More than anything, Israel's actions ruffled Turkish feathers because Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had mentioned nothing of the impending attack in a meeting with Prime Minister Erdoğan only days before the war. He took strong personal offense at being blindsided, which translated into a broader sense of Turkey being disrespected. Erdoğan later stated that his anger was not at the Israeli people, but at the Israeli government that "has not acted decently towards us."¹⁶⁵

The Gaza conflict was a breaking point. Ankara now abandoned all efforts at ostensible balance, becoming the chief castigator of Israel in international forums, going much further even than most Arab leaders would in its criticism.¹⁶⁶ Prime Minister Erdoğan, in strongly emotional terms, blasted Israel for "crimes against humanity" and "killing children on beaches."¹⁶⁷ He also blamed "Jewish-controlled media" for distorting news about Gaza, a statement that did not seem to align with his earlier denial of any anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic sentiment—or his declaration that anti-Semitism constituted a crime against humanity. His

reaction appeared disproportionate to the magnitude of the conflict, which is estimated to have cost 1,300 lives—especially given his simultaneous good relations with the much bloodier Sudanese leader, Omar Al-Bashir. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdoğan publicly argued that Israel’s alleged war crimes in Gaza were worse than the conflict in Darfur, where it is widely acknowledged that more than 300,000 people have been killed: “Gaza and Darfur should not be confused with each other. Fifteen hundred people were killed in Gaza. If there was something like this in Darfur, we would follow that to the end as well.”¹⁶⁸ Erdoğan has at times referred to “hundreds of thousands” Palestinians killed by Israel, raising concerns over the sources of his information.

In late January 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan famously walked off the stage during an event at the Davos World Economic Forum after starting a shouting match with Israeli President Shimon Peres. Following the Davos incident, Turkey disinvited Israel from planned joint military exercises under the NATO aegis.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, the Turkish Air Force began installing a new identification friend or foe (IFF) system on its F-16 aircraft, replacing the built-in system that automatically designated Israeli jets or ships as friendly in order to prevent armed clashes between Turkish and Israeli forces. The new system, produced by Turkish company Aselsan, does not automatically designate Israeli ships or jets as friendly.¹⁷⁰

This led to the near-rupture of relations in 2010, but the worst was yet to come. That spring, an NGO closely connected to the AKP, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), designed and implemented the notorious “Ship to Gaza” flotilla, which appeared deliberately aimed at putting Israel in an untenable position.¹⁷¹ When nine Turkish citizens were killed Israeli commandos boarded the ship, Ankara erupted. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu called the event “Turkey’s 9/11,” and a series of Turkish leaders threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Israel.¹⁷² Prime Minister Erdoğan stated in no uncertain terms that he saw the event as a *casus belli* and that he did not believe Hamas was a terrorist organization.¹⁷³

In the aftermath of the crisis, Turkish leaders demanded not only an Israeli apology and compensation, but also the lifting of the blockade of Gaza, as conditions for restoring full diplomatic relations with Israel. Turkey also tried to put strong pressure on the United States to take its side in the controversy. That did not go far, however: Turkish leaders soon came to realize that the debate in the United States rapidly shifted from an initial bewilderment at Israel’s response to the flotilla to anger at Turkey’s role in instigating, and its handling of, of the crisis. In the months that followed, Turkish leaders variously promised military escorts for future flotillas to Gaza (which did not materialize) and threatened Israel with naval retaliation should it continue to develop gas deposits with Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean.

When *The Economist* endorsed the opposition CHP in Turkey’s June 2011 elections, Prime Minister Erdoğan accused the international media of being supported by Israel—even though the conservative British publication can hardly be considered pro-Israel. Indeed, he used the episode to castigate the CHP’s leader for being an Israeli project and expressed regret over the fact that the CHP, under Turkey’s second president Ismet İnönü, had recognized the state of Israel, alluding also to a growing perception “equating the star of Zion with the

swastika.¹⁷⁴ In September 2012, Hamas leader Mesha'al was invited as a guest of honor to the AKP convention and given a standing ovation and an embrace by Erdoğan.¹⁷⁵

Such bellicose rhetoric abated, largely due to U.S. pressure and the growing crisis in Syria, which refocused Turkish minds. However, when Israeli jets bombed targets in Syria in the beginning of 2013, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu lambasted Syria's leadership for failing to respond, stating that "Turkey would not stay unresponsive to an Israeli attack against any Muslim country."¹⁷⁶

In May 2013, President Obama used the opportunity of his visit to Israel to encourage Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to call his Turkish counterpart and formally apologize for the flotilla incident. Prime Minister Erdoğan accepted the apology, and Israeli and Turkish diplomats initiated negotiations on compensation. While this was hailed as an important step in restoring Turkish-Israeli relations, it remains to be seen whether it will have any lasting effect.

Indeed, while this thaw in relations was taking place, Prime Minister Erdoğan publicly called Zionism a "crime against humanity," comparing it to anti-Semitism, fascism, and Islamophobia.¹⁷⁷ Following the Taksim Square unrest in June 2013, Erdoğan implicitly blamed the unrest on Jews.¹⁷⁸ Close Erdoğan ally and Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek and the main AKP mouthpiece *Yeni Şafak* went further, making the fantastic accusation that the unrest had been planned by predominantly Jewish American neo-conservatives at a February 2013 meeting at the American Enterprise Institute, which it further claimed was funded by the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee.¹⁷⁹ On July 1, Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay publicly accused the "Jewish diaspora" of responsibility for the Taksim protests. While Atalay later claimed he had been misquoted, video of his speech is available on the Internet.¹⁸⁰ Even though Turkey and Israel were able to overcome this rhetoric and conclude stalled reconciliation negotiations, it is clear that the relationship between the countries will and cannot return to the closeness that characterized the 1990s.

What Drove Change?

The progression of Turkish policies toward Israel and the Palestinians is relatively linear. During the AKP's first term in power, the Turkish government maintained a relatively low profile, keeping positive relations with Israel while simultaneously criticizing its policies toward the Palestinians. In this respect, the Erdoğan government differed little from earlier Turkish governments, which had often harshly criticized Israeli policies.

In the first term, the significant novelty was Turkey's overt courting of Hamas, which likely would not have occurred under any other government. If Turkey's intention was to acquire a role in the peace process, the most natural move would have been to focus on establishing relations with the Palestinian Authority, the recognized representative of the Palestinian people, with whom previous Turkish governments had had only limited relations. At the time, however, Ankara claimed it was using its engagement and influence to moderate Hamas, a claim that was mistakenly taken at face value.

That mistake became evident when, during the AKP's second term, relations with Israel rapidly deteriorated. This deterioration coincided with the Gaza war, the AKP's consolidation of power, and the removal of the military—the main advocate for a close relationship with Israel—as a force in Turkish politics.

A critical question is: to what extent did Israeli policies play a role in the deterioration of relations? Turkey's response to the war in Gaza coincided with a broad condemnation of Israeli actions across Europe, among other places. Israel's bungled commando operation to board the *Mavi Marmara* was similarly castigated by many European powers. Thus, it is arguable that any Turkish government, aware of the pro-Palestinian sentiments in Turkish society, would have felt compelled to react in strong terms to these incidents.

However, this explanation is insufficient for several reasons. First, Israeli policies do not explain Turkey's prior warming to Hamas. Second, Turkey's response to the Gaza war was incomparably harsher than its reaction to the 2006 war in Lebanon. Third, Turkey was not a passive bystander to the Gaza flotilla. Quite to the contrary, the Turkish government had actively, though not publicly, abetted the organizers of the flotilla. Most importantly, while Israeli policies can justify some of the criticism, it can in no way explain Erdoğan's bellicose threats against Israel or the growing incidence of public invocation of Jewish or Israeli conspiracies against his government.

What of the role of rising Turkish power? To some extent, Turkish fury at Israel's 2008 attack on Gaza was partly due to a sense of hurt pride, both on a personal and national level. Similarly, the killing of several Turkish protesters on the *Mavi Marmara* was seen as an affront to Turkey's national pride. Yet Turkish policies hardly worked to enhance Turkey's regional position. In fact, the harshness of Turkey's rhetoric put an end to the possibility of Turkey playing a mediating role in the conflict in the Middle East or between Israel and Syria, as Israel essentially lost trust in Turkey as an honest broker. Moreover, Turkish hyperbole, especially in 2010, undercut its image in the United States.

Turkey's failure to attain its wide-ranging demands from Israel further damaged its credibility. For example, Turkey long warned Israel of the consequences of failing to comply with the upcoming U.N. Palmer report on the Gaza flotilla, apparently assuming it would declare the Gaza blockade illegal. Yet the report upheld the legality of the blockade, while finding Israel had used "unreasonable force" against the flotilla. Turkish leaders then expelled Israel's ambassador, downgraded diplomatic relations, suspended military relations, and warned that this constituted Israel's "last chance" to apologize, threatening sanctions if Israel did not comply.¹⁸¹ Yet when Israel failed to respond, there was little Ankara could do. The eventual Israeli apology came two years later and as a result of American pressure rather than Turkish threats. This suggests that the episode damaged rather than helped Turkey's regional standing. Indeed, many Arab leaders—used to castigating Israel in public while maintaining informal channels of communication with Israeli leaders—were mystified when they discovered that Turkey's moves were not only rhetorical, but that they were actually matched by the cutting of communications with Israel.

Here certainly was a case of the important role of personalities—that of Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu—in Turkish foreign policy. Turkish rhetoric was very much linked to the personal slights that this duo felt they had suffered at the hands of Israel and resulted from their efforts to save face. Moreover, the many Turkish miscalculations—such as the threats cited in the previous paragraph or the apparent expectation that Washington would follow Turkey’s lead in condemning Israel for the raid on the flotilla—were a direct result of a foreign policy run by two individuals who were sidelining an experienced bureaucracy. If Turkish decision-making had been more inclusive, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu would certainly have been made to understand how unlikely such an outcome would be. But such missteps and personal considerations do not suffice to explain either Prime Minister Erdoğan’s embrace of Hamas or the anti-Semitic rhetoric that has accompanied the deterioration of Turkey’s relationship with Israel.

In the end, therefore, only the ideological underpinnings of the AKP can make sense of the evolution of Turkish policy toward Israel. Shared roots in Sunni Islamism certainly help explain the AKP’s relationship with Hamas. Moreover, Turkish policies toward Israel seem motivated in part by the instinctive anti-Zionist bias of Turkish Islamism.

The AKP’s harsh rhetoric against Israel and the frequent mention of classical anti-Semitic conspiracies betrays a deep-seated animus toward Israel and a deep suspicion, at the least, of Jews. The respective places of Darfur and Gaza in Erdoğan’s worldview—whose public comments suggest a belief that more people have been killed in Gaza than in Darfur—cannot be rationally explained; neither can the fact that no other country was subjected to lambasting on par with his public denunciations of Israel. Only his falling out with Assad comes close, but even that appears to be more personal, given the previous friendship of the two leaders. Indeed, the behavior of Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu conforms entirely to the ideological worldview of Turkish Islamism of the Milli Görüş variety and its highly negative and conspiratorial perception of Jews and Israel.

Of course, another element was a clear AKP preference for Hamas over Fatah from the outset. As an Arab commentator wrote, “The notion that Erdoğan and his ruling party have a clear slant toward Hamas has become widespread.”¹⁸² Although Fatah leaders in Ramallah enjoy international recognition, the AKP has had little inclination to include them in its efforts to support the peace process; their interaction has been limited to their attempts at facilitating Fatah-Hamas reconciliation. Fatah leaders have not been feted at AKP headquarters or conventions like Hamas leaders have, and Erdoğan has repeatedly stated his aim to visit Gaza, despite disapproval from Ramallah, which feels such a visit would undermine its legitimacy. Such taking of sides in intra-Palestinian politics is only explained by the AKP relationship to the Muslim Brotherhood. Viewed in the context of a political movement that always saw the Brotherhood as an inspiration, it is no wonder that the AKP would have a natural predisposition toward Hamas, which is nothing other than the Palestinian wing of the Brotherhood—unlike Fatah, whose origins are in the PLO. This also explains why Israel’s war with Hezbollah, a Shi’a organization, attracted much less Turkish criticism than its war with Hamas.

In this sense, it is instructive to compare Erdoğan (and Davutoğlu) with his stated role models—Menderes, Özal, and Erbakan. As discussed above, center-right leaders with a religious twist such as Menderes and Özal had no inhibitions against developing close ties with Israel. Demirel, being less of a religious politician to begin with, went much further. By contrast, Erbakan remained ideologically committed to the Milli Görüş's anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic worldview. Thus, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's behavior is more reminiscent of Erbakan's worldview than that of Özal's or Menderes's.

The progression of Turkish policies toward Israel and the Palestinians was directly related to the consolidation of the AKP's and Erdoğan's power. Aware of the symbolic importance accorded to Israel by both the Turkish military and Western Powers, Prime Minister Erdoğan and his associates in the early years in power maintained an image of moderation, much as Erbakan had done in his brief tenure in power. Being the leader of a self-avowedly post-Islamic party, Erdoğan went further than Erbakan, even visiting Israel in 2005. But as his power got stronger, Prime Minister Erdoğan and other AKP leaders felt increasingly less inhibited, allowing their ideological convictions to guide their public statements as well as their policies. A more distant and critical relationship toward Israel was closely aligned with the AKP's broader goals of making Turkey the leading Islamic power in the Middle East.

Egypt: A New Ally Lost

Up until very recently, Egypt did not play a key role in Turkish foreign policy. Although they share centuries of common history—Egypt was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in 1517—in modern times the two countries have generally shared cordial, but not particularly close, relations. Republican Turkey’s preoccupation with the West ensured that its main concern regarding the Middle East was with its immediate neighbors. This remained the case during much of the AKP’s tenure, but changed dramatically with the Egyptian revolution of 2011, after which Ankara began cultivating an alliance with Cairo. Indeed, in 2011, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu overtly proclaimed Ankara’s interest in developing a strategic alliance between the two countries as a keystone of Middle Eastern stability. But the strong relations forged between Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood–led government in Egypt quickly soured with President Mohamed Morsi’s ouster by the Egyptian military. The obvious question for observers is: why this sudden focus on Egypt and drastic reaction to Morsi’s removal?

Turkish-Egyptian Relations until 2003

During the formative years of the Cold War in the 1950s, Turkey and Egypt found themselves in rival camps. Turkish Prime Minister Menderes, somewhat of a precursor to the AKP in terms of his interest and activism in the Middle East, wanted to court Egypt. His goal was to prevent, at the very least, Egyptian opposition to the alliance system Turkey was building, which would result in the Baghdad Pact and later CENTO. Menderes sought a meeting with Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954 but was rebuffed, with Egypt explicitly citing Turkey’s friendship with Israel and its efforts to establish an alliance system in the Middle East with Western powers.¹⁸³ Egypt saw the Baghdad Pact as a challenge to the Arab League and a threat to its own ambitions of primacy in the Middle East. Thus, Egypt and Turkey’s paths diverged: the former becoming a leading force in the Non-Aligned Movement, as the latter embraced its role as a member of the U.S.-led alliance seeking to contain the Soviet Union. Disagreement between the two was also illustrated by Turkey’s strong negative reaction to Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal.¹⁸⁴ In the years that followed, Egypt’s support for the Greek position on Cyprus would further complicate relations.

In the 1970s, changes in Turkish foreign policy led to an amelioration of relations. Turkey sided with the Arabs in the 1973 war with Israel, joined the OIC, and toned down confrontation with the Soviet Union. All of this helped remove irritants in Turkish-Egyptian relations. Similarly, Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel in 1979 aligned Egypt and Turkey in regional affairs: both were key U.S. allies in the Middle East that had cordial relations with Israel. Turkish President Özal did cultivate positive ties with his counterpart, Hosni Mubarak,

and the two coordinated frequently during the Gulf War and its aftermath. After Özal's death, Demirel would take the same approach.

In the mid-1990s, Turkish-Egyptian relations suffered a new low, as two major developments in Turkey irritated Egypt: the entente with Israel and Erbakan's rise to power. As described in the previous chapter, Cairo saw the Turkish-Israeli entente as shaking up the balance in the Middle East in a way that was detrimental to its interests. Indeed, Egypt was second only to Syria in denouncing the entente.

The leaders of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia gathered in Damascus in June 1996 to urge Turkey to reconsider its treaty with Israel. The urging was repeated later that month at a Cairo summit of the Arab League. Egypt's harsh reaction surprised Ankara, which perhaps mistook Egypt's peace treaty with Israel for a normalization of relations; however, Egyptian leaders termed the entente as "nothing less than an aggression on Arab states."¹⁸⁵

Egyptian domestic politics also contributed to Egyptian-Turkish tension. Erbakan repeatedly complained about the plight of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. During a June 1996 visit to Ankara, Erbakan urged Mubarak to tolerate the Brotherhood and release its members—who he called "close friends of his party"—from jail. Mubarak then delineated the terrorist acts that the Brotherhood had been involved in and asked Foreign Minister Çiller to explain to Erbakan the Brotherhood's true nature.¹⁸⁶ Erbakan apparently raised the issue again during a visit to Cairo in October 1996, telling Mubarak that the Brotherhood activists are "good people." This prompted a sarcastic response from Mubarak, who told Erbakan that if he liked the Brotherhood activists so much, "we'll send them all to you."¹⁸⁷

Relations nevertheless normalized in the late 1990s. The Erbakan irritant was gone and Egypt inserted itself as a mediator between Turkey and Syria during the 1998 crisis, which provided an opportunity to improve relations at a high level. President Demirel used that opportunity to consolidate his relations with Mubarak and visited Cairo in 1999, managing to avoid any Egyptian mention of the Turkish-Israeli entente.¹⁸⁸

The AKP and Egypt

In the first two terms of the AKP's tenure, Egypt was not a priority. Several major steps were taken in the development of bilateral relations with the Mubarak regime, but it is significant that these were driven less by the AKP than by the Kemalist establishment. Thus, a free trade agreement was signed in December 2005, during secularist President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's visit to Cairo. Similarly, in 2008, Turkey and Egypt signed an agreement deepening military cooperation, but the process was led by the General Staff and concluded during a visit by Chief of Staff Yaşar Büyükanıt to Cairo.¹⁸⁹ The AKP government did not block the development of relations with Egypt, but it was not a driving force, either.

This changed with the uprising in Egypt in January 2011. Already on February 1, only six days after protests there began, Prime Minister Erdoğan issued what he termed a "candid warning" to Mubarak to "meet the people's desire for change," reminding the Egyptian

leader that “we will all die one day and be judged by those who remain.”¹⁹⁰ The next day, he upped the ante, urging Mubarak to resign immediately, making him the first world leader to do so.¹⁹¹ The alacrity of the AKP’s pivot on Egypt is all the more telling when compared to its refusal to comment on Iran’s Green Movement in 2009 and its hesitance to turn on Gaddafi later in 2011.

When Mubarak eventually resigned, Erdoğan was largely credited for his role, and his popularity reached new highs across the Arab world. Ankara’s involvement then grew rapidly: Foreign Minister Davutoğlu set off for a visit to Cairo in April and another in July, laying the groundwork for Erdoğan’s upcoming trip amidst increasing and vocal AKP support for the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹²

Originally scheduled for July, Prime Minister Erdoğan eventually visited Cairo in September 2011, receiving a hero’s welcome. In this first visit of a Turkish Prime Minister since Erbakan’s trip in 1996, Erdoğan used his visit to further relations with Egypt and to criticize Israel, but also to defend the Turkish model of secularism.¹⁹³ While this latter aspect was much noted, it was less reported that he urged Egyptians not to be afraid of secularism, as it did not pose a danger to religion, emphasizing that it did not mean atheism. His comments underlined his own ability as a Muslim politician to come to power and stay in power in a secular system. In other words, Prime Minister Erdoğan’s defense of secularism could be interpreted as counseling caution to the Brotherhood, but not a change in their Islamist agenda or aspirations. Indeed, months later, some in the Turkish government would become concerned that the haste of President Morsi’s power grab was proving counterproductive.¹⁹⁴

The new role Egypt took on in Ankara’s thinking was revealed the week after Erdoğan’s visit, as Foreign Minister Davutoğlu laid out his view on the importance of the Turkish-Egyptian relationship. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Davutoğlu explained that “Egypt would become the focus of Turkish efforts, as an older American-backed order, buttressed by Israel, Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, prerevolutionary Egypt, begins to crumble.” Turkey, he went on, sought to “create a new axis of power at a time when American influence in the Middle East seems to be diminishing ... an axis of democracy of the two biggest nations in our region, from the north to the south, from the Black Sea down to the Nile Valley in Sudan.”¹⁹⁵

While this grand scheme was typical of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu’s style, it was not empty talk. Already in December 2011, Turkey and Egypt held joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean.¹⁹⁶ Turkish-Egyptian relations strengthened further when Morsi was sworn in as Egyptian president in the summer of 2012. In September, Turkey pledged a \$2 billion aid package to Egypt to help revitalize the Egyptian economy, at a time when Egypt was having difficulties obtaining credit from international financial institutions.¹⁹⁷ The two countries conferred frequently on Syria and, before Egypt’s renewed internal turmoil, Turkish experts even began to speculate on a joint Turkish-Egyptian intervention in Syria.¹⁹⁸

In September 2012, Morsi was a guest of honor along with Hamas leader Mesha'al at the AKP convention, in which he referred to Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül as "brothers," emphasized the joint stance of the two countries on "the Palestinian and Syrian issues," and underlined Egypt's need for Turkey's help in managing the process after the Arab Awakening.¹⁹⁹ By November, Erdoğan was back in Cairo to sign 27 agreements in various fields ranging from health care to transportation.²⁰⁰ And unlike Western powers and minority and opposition representatives in Egypt, Ankara was strongly supportive of Egypt's controversial new constitution, approved by referendum in December 2012, which strengthened the power of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁰¹

Thus, by early 2013, Turkey had put aside concerns over Morsi's rashness in consolidating power and was working hard to make Egypt its key partner in the Middle East. This rapid development occurred against the backdrop of skepticism among many observers, Turkish as well as Western, about the potential for such an alliance between countries that historically had been rivals for influence in the region, rather than partners.²⁰² This AKP blindness to historical enmity and clashing strategic priorities resembled its approach to Iran. And just as Iran saw the AKP as a competitor for the mantle of regional power, so too did Egypt not always appreciate Turkey's attempts to use it as a means to bolster its own standing.

Glimpses of a renewed rivalry emerged, for example, when Egypt eclipsed Turkey in mediation between Fatah and Hamas, as well as in negotiations with Israel, including those that led to the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who was abducted and held hostage by Hamas. Similarly, Ankara and Cairo have had divergent approaches to Iran, with Morsi and the Brotherhood taking a more conciliatory position on Iran, seeking to involve it in the resolution to the Syrian crisis, whereas Turkey has taken a more confrontational approach.

Yet there is reason to take Foreign Minister Davutoğlu at his word when he claims that Turkey actually desires a strong Egypt and was not concerned by Morsi's successes abroad. Turkish support for Morsi proved rock-solid, even as Morsi's missteps and increasingly authoritarian edicts precipitated a crisis in July 2013, with Egyptians taking to the streets calling for Morsi to resign. Turkey's reaction was swift and adamant in supporting the AKP's ideological ally.

Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu both reacted harshly to the Egyptian military's ouster of Morsi, with Erdoğan repeatedly decrying Western powers for failing to term it a coup. Turkey even called for U.N. intervention in Egypt, a provocation that led the new government in Cairo to summon the Turkish ambassador and reprimand him for interfering in its internal politics.²⁰³ In Egypt, Turkey's reaction was widely perceived as biased and one-sided, given that Turkish leaders had not reacted when Morsi grabbed more power to rule by decree, and ignored the legitimacy of the protest movement against the Muslim Brotherhood leader.²⁰⁴

As the international reaction to the ouster of Morsi proved lukewarm, with Turkey's position finding little traction, Prime Minister Erdoğan escalated rather than dampened his rhetoric.

On August 20, he accused Israel of masterminding the coup against Morsi.²⁰⁵ When that statement drew a rebuke from the White House, which called the comments “offensive, unsubstantiated, and wrong,” Erdoğan castigated the United States for its temerity in criticizing him.²⁰⁶ Not content to leave matters be, Erdoğan made the unprecedented move of denouncing Egypt’s leading Islamic cleric, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayeb, for endorsing the coup against Morsi, saying history will curse scholars like him.²⁰⁷

Thus, in the course of a month, Prime Minister Erdoğan managed to take relations between Cairo and Ankara from historic highs to an absolute nadir, further isolating Turkey in the process. Indeed, even Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both worried about the rising power of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, recognized the new government in Egypt, leaving Erdoğan standing alone in support of Morsi and with fewer allies in the Middle East than ever. This isolation became all the more evident when, on November 23, the Egyptian government expelled the Turkish ambassador, Huseyin Avni Botsali, declaring him “*persona non grata*,” and downgraded diplomatic relations with Ankara to *charge d’affaires*.²⁰⁸ Abdel-Rahman Salaheddin, the Egyptian ambassador to Turkey, was in turn declared unwelcome by Ankara, although he had already left Turkey a couple of months prior due to rising tensions between the two powers.

On November 24, Ankara attempted to bridge the growing gap between Turkey and Egypt by asserting their “permanent and ever-lasting friendship,” and adding how, “the stability and prosperity of Egypt is very important for us and strategically very important for the region.”²⁰⁹ Cairo responded with a set of stringent conditions for restoring relations—including that Turkey stop supporting the Muslim Brotherhood; that it, along with Qatar, cease collecting evidence that could be forwarded to the International Criminal Court; and that it stop hosting meetings with the Brotherhood.

What Drove Change?

The rise of the Turkish-Egyptian alignment was both rapid and decisive, its decline similarly swift, with several factors appearing to drive the process. The 2011 change of power in Egypt offered Turkey an opportunity to fine tune a new foreign policy approach and to regain some of the regional clout it had lost when its efforts to cultivate Syria and Iran under the “zero problems” approach failed. Egypt was the AKP’s first attempt to adjust its policy to the new realities of the region. This new approach was unveiled in Erdoğan’s victory speech after his reelection in June 2011, when he declared Turkey’s commitment to supporting democracy across the Middle East.

Still, this explanation does not suffice to explain the speed with which Prime Minister Erdoğan, in complete contravention of his earlier actions, sided with the protesters and urged Mubarak to resign—and subsequently went into overdrive to build a strategic alliance with post-revolutionary Egypt. Indeed, it stood in stark contrast to Erdoğan’s behavior during the Green Revolution in Iran, where Turkey’s endorsement of Ahmadinejad’s reelection and its silence during the brutal repression of the demonstrations in Iran generated some embarrassment, as did Erdoğan’s initial stance on the Libyan conflict.

Turkey's leaders seemed unfazed by the brutality of Iran's leaders and felt no particular attachment to the demonstrators in Tehran's streets. By contrast, the confrontation in Cairo did strike a chord, as Prime Minister Erdoğan and his associates appeared to feel a strong antipathy toward Mubarak and an affinity with his opponents.

In 2010, a former AKP minister and deputy chairman told one of this paper's authors that one should not confuse Arab regimes and Arab populations. These countries are ruled by monarchies, he argued, specifically noting that he included Mubarak's Egypt in that definition. They would be swept away, he predicted, by democratic forces that he assumed would share the AKP's worldview.²¹⁰ Similar views can be found in Davutoğlu's writings and are eerily reminiscent of Erbakan's emphasis on the Muslim Brotherhood's plight in his dealings with Mubarak.

Thus, it is clear that ideological factors played an important role in the AKP's policy toward Egypt. As the AKP deputy chairman's comments suggest, the AKP leadership was hostile to Mubarak's regime because of its suppression of their ideological affiliate, the Muslim Brotherhood. It is against this backdrop that Prime Minister Erdoğan's strong rhetoric on Mubarak should be seen: the moment when the monarchical regimes would fall had finally arrived and Erdoğan took it upon himself to hasten that process and promote his ideological ally. And unlike Western leaders, who focused on the urban liberal element in the protests that unseated Mubarak, the AKP's leaders are likely to have seen their own rise to power as a model and understood that Egypt's small liberal groups would be unable to compete with the size, resources, discipline, and organizational skill of the Brotherhood. Ideology, too, explains Turkey's rapid squandering of any good faith it had garnered in Egypt through its stubborn defense of Morsi and denunciation of Egypt's new military leaders as the perpetrators of an undemocratic coup. The AKP's fervent ideological support for the Muslim Brotherhood, obfuscated by calls for democratic legitimacy in Egypt, is the primary source of the diplomatic gulf between Turkey and Egypt.

In this sense, Turkey's Egypt policy conforms very well to its policies on Syria and the Palestinian issue. In the case of all three, the AKP appears motivated by the goal of supporting the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, be that in the shape of Morsi in Egypt, the Syrian National Council, or Hamas. This strongly suggests the importance of ideology as a pivotal factor in the AKP's foreign policy.

Concluding Discussion

The cases surveyed in this study are by no means an exhaustive study of Turkish foreign policy. Nevertheless, they constitute vivid illustrations of key areas of Turkish activity in the past decade. As such, they lend themselves to some tentative conclusions about the changes that have occurred in Turkey's approach to and relations with the Middle East.

A central conclusion is that Turkish foreign policy has undergone a remarkable shift in terms of orientation as well as style.

Prior to Prime Minister Erdoğan's rule, the orientation of Turkish foreign policy was firmly Western: Turkey's general role in other regions was intimately connected with its role as a part of the West. In the past decade, by contrast, it has become clear that Turkey's leaders see the Western alliance as one among several vectors of its foreign policy, one that no longer determines Turkey's activities elsewhere. When Turkey expanded its involvement to its east and south under Özal, these relationships were intended in part to strengthen its ties with the West. Today, the AKP's Middle Eastern outreach occurs independently from, and sometimes in contradiction to, its Western ties.

Moreover, the style of Turkish foreign policy has changed dramatically—from being cautious and predictable, to being characterized by rapid and unpredictable shifts, dominated by the personal preferences and impulses of Erdoğan and his coterie.

Less appreciated, however, is that the substance of Turkish foreign policy—its driving motivation and impulse—has changed dramatically. Indeed, all the other modifications of Turkey's external relations flow from the fundamental revision of the sources of Turkish conduct inaugurated by the AKP. Formerly, Turkish foreign policy was driven exclusively by *realpolitik* considerations of national interest. Today, as this paper has shown, the Islamist ideology of the AKP has become a central, though not the sole, force shaping Turkey's approach to the rest of the world.

None of the other possible factors, raised at the outset of this study, can satisfactorily explain the changes in Turkish foreign policy and its growing focus on the Middle East.

A first was the notion that Turkey's aspirations of regional leadership have led it to an increasing and pragmatic focus on areas in its neighborhood. In particular, Turkey's efforts to establish relations with Syria and Iran fall into this category: Syria is Turkey's conduit to the Arab Middle East, while close ties with Iran would position Turkey as a leading go-to power on one of the most contentious issues in world politics. The courting of Egypt also fits, as it occurred after the demise of relations with Syria and Iran, and served to avoid regional isolation. Turkish behavior with regard to Israel and the Palestinians, however, is difficult to fit into this paradigm, except if one assumes that downgrading relations with Israel is a necessity for a leadership role in the Middle East.

Yet while the quest for regional leadership is helpful in understanding the greater level of attention to the Middle East, it fails to explain the substance of Turkish policies. From 2008 to 2011, Ankara's courting of Iran and Syria occurred in a fashion that was not only uncoordinated with Western powers; it deliberately ignored the international consensus on the issues of Iran's nuclear program and both countries' state sponsorship of terrorism. Indeed, Turkey stepped in to provide important cover to both regimes at a time of growing Western pressure—most obviously for Damascus following the Hariri assassination in 2005 and for Tehran during the 2010 nuclear standoff. Similarly, the substance of Ankara's stance on intra-Palestinian relations—a widely perceived bias toward Hamas—does not fit with the notion of a pragmatic quest for leadership. Indeed, both that bias and the strong anti-Israeli rhetoric damaged Turkey's ambitions to play a leading role in the region. And while the courting of Egypt is in itself congruent with leadership ambitions, the strong pro-Brotherhood bias visible in Turkey's policies from the 2011 revolution to the 2013 demise of Morsi is not.

The second factor was the assertion that Western policies have alienated Turkey. To some degree, this is valid: the behavior of European powers like Germany and France certainly served to discourage Turkey from its European Union ambitions, exposing a double standard against Turkey on overtly cultural and religious grounds. To a lesser extent, frustration with U.S. policies during the Iraq war also strengthened the politics of civilizational identity in both Turkey and the broader region.

However, this portrays Turkey as a passive and reactive object of international politics, not as an active force designing its own policies. Turkey had been exposed to similar treatment at the hands of Europe for decades, and surely, a levelheaded government would see the vast importance of the accession negotiations with the European Union, certainly in comparison with deliberately provocative statements by European politicians. Yet, while it is true that France and Cyprus blocked Turkey from opening new chapters of negotiations with the European Union, Turkey for almost a decade has made little progress on the chapters that were already opened.

Similarly, Turkish-U.S. disagreements throughout the Cold War were many, including the 1962 missile crisis, President Lyndon Johnson's letter warning Turkey against invading Cyprus in 1964, the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, and the 1980 military coup. At several points, Turkey either felt betrayed by its chief ally or faced outright sanctions. Nothing of the sort took place in the past decade. Thus, alienating Western policies could not, certainly in isolation, explain the historic shift that has taken place in Turkish foreign policy.

The third factor considered in this study was the changing decision-making structure in Turkey: from a largely bureaucratic model to one centered on the personalities of Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. This thesis is certainly corroborated by the cases studied, which suggest that while Davutoğlu may provide the strategic and intellectual inspiration, Prime Minister Erdoğan's towering role over Turkish politics certainly extends to the realm of foreign policy. And in doing so, he has displayed a tendency to personalize foreign relations.

This was most remarkable in relation to Israel in late 2008, when Ehud Olmert's failure to inform Prime Minister Erdoğan of the upcoming operation in Gaza was taken as a personal insult, which led to Erdoğan's reaction to the conflict. Similarly, Bashar Al-Assad's refusal to follow Prime Minister Erdoğan's advice to reform in 2011 injected a deeply personal aspect into Erdoğan's decision to pursue regime change in Syria, especially given the previous public displays of friendship between the two men and their families. Similarly, personal relations may account for part of the difference in Turkey's responses to public demonstrations in Iran in 2009 and Egypt in 2011. Erdoğan appears to have developed a personal tie to Ahmadinejad, whom he has publicly called a friend numerous times. It is plausible that this inhibited Turkish criticism of Iran's repression of the Green movement following the 2009 elections. Conversely, there was no love lost between Erdoğan and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; this personal antipathy likely contributed to Erdoğan's unprecedented call for Mubarak to resign.

More broadly, the unpredictability of Turkish foreign policy derives in great part from a decision-making system under which major policy choices are determined by one man. And thus, Turkey's position on key international issues has remained undecided to the last minute on several occasions. For example, Turkey long opposed the appointment of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen to head NATO in 2009; intervention by President Obama cut a deal that led Prime Minister Erdoğan to withdraw Turkey's veto. Similarly, Turkey's acquiescence to the NATO missile defense systems in 2010, and the deployment of these systems in Malatya in 2011, were uncertain until Erdoğan was convinced to agree. And in the Libya crisis, Erdoğan initially opposed intervention before flip-flopping to support it.

Of course, Prime Minister Erdoğan's personality can help explain some of the style of foreign policy; but the substance and content of the policy cannot simply be explained by the nature of his personality.

All cases surveyed suggest that ideological considerations in Turkish foreign policy have grown in direct proportion to the AKP's consolidation of power at home. These considerations have not been static, but have developed along with the decay of the Middle East into increasingly sectarian strife. Thus, Turkish policies were initially colored by a vision of Islamic unity that allowed for the embrace of Shi'a Iran; but shifted after 2011 to an ever more sectarian worldview, which led Ankara to prioritize its support for the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Now they might be shifting back.

From 2008 to 2011, there was no sectarian dimension in Turkish policy toward the Middle East. If anything, it appeared motivated by a pan-Islamic embrace of Muslim countries in general, and the prominence given to the regimes running Iran, Syria, Sudan, and Gaza suggested a focus on regimes with poor ties to the West. The sectarian nature of the regimes seemed to matter little; and in this, Turkey was not alone. In fact, one of the most prominent developments of the period was Iran's embrace of Hamas, linking the Shi'a theocracy to the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

At the time, sectarian conflict, such as it was, remained largely constrained to the Shi'a-Sunni standoff in the Gulf, which centered mainly on Iraq. But it would soon spread. The Arab upheavals in 2011 led to the unraveling of the established order in the region and the broadening of sectarian strife, largely played out by proxy in Syria. Along with this development, Turkey's broad engagement with Islamic regimes was replaced by a more sectarian policy. Turkey doubled down on its relationships with Sunni movements, especially those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, while its ties to Shi'a powers worsened considerably—as suggested by the trajectory of its relations with Damascus, Tehran, and Baghdad. This may not be a development that the Turkish leadership sought; but it is not one that it worked hard to prevent, either. If Ankara was dragged down a sectarian path, it was hardly a reluctant traveler.

Indeed, the dramatic divergence in Ankara's attitude to the various countries and regimes in the region begs for an explanation. Turkey's leadership was willing to cut considerable slack to Iran's Ahmadinejad and, initially, to Syria's Assad; this attitude stood in marked contrast to the speed and vehemence with which it denounced Egypt's Mubarak, and later the ouster of Morsi.

This shift in Turkish foreign policy was a pragmatic course-correction in the AKP's pursuit of its ideological objectives. The "zero problems" policy that preceded Turkey's more activist line meshes well with Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's romantic notions of Islamic unity, prominent in his writings. Indeed, his writings assume the existence of a fault line between the West and the Muslim world; they are entirely silent on divides *within* the Muslim world, whether sectarian or otherwise. As discussed earlier, this is reminiscent of the Muslim Brotherhood ideologues' ambivalent views of Shi'ism.

Viewed in this light, the AKP government's policies become understandable: they were initially prompted by the ideological motivation of seeking Islamic unity and convergence. This underscores the central role of the Syrian crisis not only in terms of realpolitik, but also in ideological terms: effectively, the Syrian civil war came to pit the Brotherhood against Tehran, pushing Turkey to take sides in a growing sectarian divide. In other words, while Turkey's leaders would have preferred to remain on a policy course that worked for Islamic unity and convergence, the Syrian crisis killed that policy option, at least temporarily. The Turkish leadership was faced with the choice of siding with Assad and Tehran, siding with the Brotherhood, or remaining neutral in the conflict. Both geopolitical realities and ideological proclivities combined to lead Turkey to take sides in the increasingly sectarian conflict. Ankara could have taken steps to avoid the appearance of sectarianism by raising the issue of the protection of minorities; yet it did not. Turkish policy has in fact paid little or no attention to the concerns and interests of the non-Sunni Arab population of Syria—whether Alawite, Christian, Kurd, Druze, or urban-secular—or for that matter, raised concerns over the situation of the Copts in Egypt.²¹¹

Of course, the Turkish leadership would not see this shift as sectarian; it would defend it as being democratic. In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan's policy reflects an understanding of democracy that could best be described as majoritarian, in contrast to the Western

constitutional understanding of democracy built on checks and balances and individual freedoms. At home, Erdoğan has long seen himself as the representative of the conservative Turkish Sunni Muslim majority, to which the minorities—whether secularists or Kurds—must adapt. Similarly, in the Middle East, the AKP leaders' view the popular will as being embodied in the Sunni Arab majority, which is in turn represented and led by the Brotherhood.

Initially, this vision did not differ much from that of Western supporters of the wave of popular protests sweeping across the Arab world and indeed the Western support for regime change in Syria. Gradually, however, the sectarianism of Turkey's leadership became apparent. The disregard for the non-Sunni groups in Syria, and the decision to go for broke with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, suggest that Turkey's calculus was different, based not on general notions of democracy but on a narrower agenda.

While in the early 1990s Turkey was touted as a model for the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union for its secularism and democracy, in the wake of the Egyptian revolution Turkey was considered a model to emulate for a different reason: "a template that effectively integrates Islam, democracy and vibrant economics," in the words of *The New York Times*.²¹² And indeed, Islamic movements across the Middle East—primarily in North Africa—have emulated the AKP's moderation and effort to gain power through democratic means. But the question is: what model do they see in Turkey? An Islamic movement that has embraced democracy, or one that has used democracy to achieve and consolidate power?

Following a decade of AKP foreign policy, the question may now be moot: as of late 2013, Turkey had increasingly painted itself into a corner, as its Middle Eastern policies led it not to a position of regional strength—or managing change, in Davutoğlu's words—but to greater regional isolation and vulnerability.

Now, Turkey seems poised to swerve yet again. Recognizing the isolation that has resulted from its sectarian drift, Ankara appears to be reviving its "zero problems" approach. In the last months of 2013, Turkey has taken steps to mend fences with Iraq's central government, reached out to Kurds in Syria, and tentatively moderated its rhetoric toward Egypt.

Turkey, however, has always remained one step behind quickly evolving events in the Middle East. Whether in backing NATO intervention in Libya or coming to terms with the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster in Egypt, Ankara's policies have been slow to catch up to regional dynamics. The few occasions when Turkey sought to shape the direction of events, by contrast, it was quickly faced with the limitations of its own influence. It could neither convince Assad to meet protesters' demands nor the Muslim Brotherhood to moderate its governing style, ultimately losing standing in both Syria and Egypt. As long as Turkish foreign policy remains reactive, it seems doomed to stay on the roller coaster trajectory it has followed over the last decade. And the main reason for this is that Turkey's policies were dictated not by pragmatism, but by ideology.

Endnotes

¹ The only exception was the Islamist Welfare Party, led by Necmettin Erbakan, that gained power in 1996, forming a short-lived coalition that made Erbakan prime minister. During its time in power, the party's leading figures called for the introduction of sharia, among other demands, and pursued a foreign policy that sought to distance Turkey from the "imperialist" West. Yet, Erbakan failed to implement any of these revisionist goals during his brief tenure (1996–1997).

² It should be noted that this notion has been often deployed by outside observers to describe past events in Turkish politics: for example, following the restoration of democracy after the 1960 military coup, *Time* magazine ran the headline "The Second Turkish Republic." (*Time*, November 3, 1961) Similarly, Erich Zürcher terms the period between the 1960 and 1980 coups as the "second republic," thus making the Turkish state after 1980 the third republic. ("The Second Turkish Republic, 1960-1980", in *Turkey: A Modern History*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1993, 253-291) Graham Fuller counts three Turkish republics, but dates the second to the introduction of democracy in 1950 and the third, somewhat arbitrarily, to the end of the Cold War. (*The New Turkish Republic: Turkey As a Pivotal State in the Muslim World*, Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2008) On this account, the transformation brought by the AKP could be termed the fourth republic. In Turkey, however, the concept of a "second republic," or *ikinci cumhuriyet*, dates back to the early 1990s and refers to a post-Kemalist Turkey. It is most often associated with author Mehmet Altan and, more broadly, with a leftist critique of the republic for resting on a regime of tutelage rather than popular sovereignty. (Mehmet Altan, "İkinci Cumhuriyet Nedir Ne Değildir?" ["What Is and Is Not the Second Republic?"], *Türkiye Günlüğü*, No. 20, Fall 1992) Some Turkish observers identify the start of a "second republic" with the AKP's return to power in 2007 (Kerem Öktem, "Harbingers of Turkey's Second Republic," *Middle East Report*, August 1, 2007), others place it at the 2010 referendum that eliminated the Kemalist elite's grip on the judiciary (Mustafa Akyol, "Toward the Second Turkish Republic," *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 17, 2010).

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BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER

1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 204-2400

WWW.BIPARTISANPOLICY.ORG