



National Security Program

Foreign Policy Project

Back to Zero Problems?

Recent Developments in Turkey's Foreign Policy

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BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER



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Executive Summary

During the twelve years that Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power its foreign policy has undergone a dramatic shift: away from its traditional Western-centric focus and toward the Middle East. Even within the context of this East-ward turn, Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP has often been erratic, with numerous changes in both its relationships with its neighbors and its allies in the West. In the midst of political turmoil, Turkey appears to be rethinking its foreign policy once again. Its attention consumed by domestic struggles, its once energetic pursuit of regional leadership seems to have been laid aside, at least for the time being. In its place, the AKP is portraying itself as seeking to gain new partners and repair old alliances, likely in an attempt to bolster its waning standing at home with a demonstration of international credibility. So far, however, there has been little to indicate that the AKP's new rhetoric of cooperation marks an actual substantive change in its behavior abroad.

The AKP derives part of its claim to power from highlighting its good image internationally, particularly in the West, where President Barack Obama once extolled Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as among the leaders with whom he shared the deepest "friendships and the bonds of trust."¹ However, Erdoğan and Obama's relationship has noticeably cooled in recent months. Beginning with the Turkish government's violent crackdown on protestors during last summer's Gezi Park demonstrations and continuing with the December 2013 revelation of corruption charges against high-ranking government officials and their associates, Turkey's international standing has been jeopardized. Indeed, the accusations of graft levied against the AKP government appear to target specifically Turkey's reputation abroad—focusing on its continued economic relationship with Iran (even in light of international sanctions) and its dealings with known members of terrorist groups.²

Even before the revelation of these corruption charges, Erdoğan's government were attempting to return what had become an increasingly sectarian foreign policy—focused on support for Sunni factions in Syria, Gaza, and Egypt at the cost of relations with other regional and Western countries—to the early days of its "zero problems with neighbors" policy.³ Now, with an 18-month long electoral season underway and its international standing crumbling, the AKP seems to be articulating a policy closer to "zero problems outside the neighborhood," in an attempt to both score some foreign policy triumphs and demonstrate to increasingly alienated Western allies that, despite growing authoritarianism at home, it can still serve as an important partner.

Specifically, Turkey has begun employing more conciliatory rhetoric on topics that are of particular interest to the United States and the European Union. For example, Ankara has suggested that the end of a long-running antagonism toward Israel is in sight and that it is ready to help facilitate a diplomatic resolution to the Cyprus dispute.⁴

The AKP has also suggested that it has lost interest in the Middle East, where it had worked to cultivate closer ties for the last decade, looking beyond its troubled neighborhood now for foreign policy successes. In recent months, the AKP has expanded its presence in Africa, sending a naval fleet to visit 28 countries on the continent and circumnavigate the Horn of Good Hope, considered intervention in the Central African Republic, and backed away from support for the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab.⁵

Thus far, however, the promising speeches on Israel and Cyprus have not been followed up with concrete actions. Potentially, the AKP government has been waiting until the March 30 local elections are over to take action in these areas, preferring not to risk losing votes by backing down from its harsh stance on Israel. But the AKP has also continued many of the policies that also put it at odds with the West in other parts of the Middle East, suggesting that it is more likely that Turkey's new rhetoric may be serving as a distraction, convincing the West that Turkey is an international partner and that the West should not risk that partnership by taking a harsh stance on Turkey's domestic politics. Indeed, with the AKP's pronounced victory in local elections, it is likely to feel little need to act on its recent cooperative overtures.

Turkey continues to cultivate close ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government at the expense of its relationship with the central government in Baghdad, and it has not moved to repair its strained ties with Egypt since Mohammad Morsi's ouster.⁶ While they still have their areas of disagreement—namely, Syria—Turkey and Iran continue to bolster their economic relationship despite warnings from the U.S. Treasury Department.⁷ And in Syria, while moderating some of its stronger rhetoric opposing a negotiated settlement, there continues to be evidence of Turkish support for the most noxious elements of the Syrian opposition.⁸

Turkey's tentative rhetorical efforts to change its tack in Israel and Cyprus should not obscure the realities of growing authoritarianism at home, as well as the number of areas abroad where Turkey is acting counter to U.S. interests. Ignoring Turkey's domestic developments in hopes of attaining favorable outcomes in Israel, Syria, and Cyprus would not only jeopardize the long-term stability of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, but also the stability of Turkey itself. Erdoğan's determination to hold onto power at all costs—banning social media, rooting out media, eroding the rule of law, and adding to the government's repressive powers—risks Turkey's standing as one of only two democratic, stable U.S. partners in the Middle East, threatening to take Turkey from an imperfect democracy to an autocracy. Should Turkey succumb to the authoritarian impulses currently on display, it would have profound implications for America's ability to work with Turkey and, therefore, for America's deepest interests.

American policymakers should squarely face the challenges confronting Turkey, as well as their implications for greater U.S.-Turkish cooperation. Rather than ignoring these concerns, U.S. policy should move toward a realistic assessment of the U.S. relationship with Turkey.

Background

The “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy advanced by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu aimed to shift Turkey away from its traditional Western focus toward greater engagement and improved relations with its southern and eastern neighbors. The AKP’s subsequent openings—to Iran, Syria, the Kurds of Iraq, and Armenia—were widely viewed in the West as the harbingers of a progressive, cooperative Turkey replacing the nationalist and distrustful attitudes of the past.

Despite initial success, however, the AKP’s foreign policy overtures foundered in the face of the popular unrest that seized the region since 2011. The shortcomings of Turkey’s “zero problems” approach were made abundantly obvious by the sudden chasm that opened between the regimes Turkey had courted, on one side, and the people of the countries those regimes ruled, on the other. Turkish foreign policy in the aftermath of the Arab upheavals effectively became one of supporting various iterations of the Muslim Brotherhood—in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Gaza—casting it as an increasingly Sunni-aligned sectarian force. More than simply supporting the Brotherhood, Turkey also grew to be a patron of violent extremists in Syria, becoming the patron of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the fight against Bashir al-Assad.

These divisive and sectarian policies left Turkey more regionally isolated than before, convincing the AKP to undertake what some saw as a “reset” of Turkey’s foreign policy. Indeed, Davutoğlu rejected the notion that Turkey had ever strayed, saying in November 2013 that Turkey “never abandoned the ‘zero problems’ policy. The criticisms targeting this policy originate from static comments. This is a dynamic policy. ‘Zero problems’ is an expression of will.”⁹

Israel and Cyprus: Areas of Conciliation?

Embroiled in a corruption scandal at home, Turkey’s government has begun to take a more cooperative approach to foreign policy, shifting from the policies that had led to Turkey’s alienation from both its neighbors and its allies in NATO and the West. With domestic troubles mounting and elections looming, Erdoğan’s government seems to be seeking out foreign policy triumphs to shore up its waning credibility.

ISRAEL

Ever since 2009, when Israeli commandos boarded the *Mavi Marmara*, a Turkish ship that was part of a Gaza Strip-bound flotilla organized by a group with possible terrorist connections, leaving seven Turkish citizens dead, relations between the two countries have been all but nonexistent. Now, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu claims that Israel and Turkey “are living through a period where our relationship is closest to normalizing since

Mavi Marmara.”¹⁰ The two sides have reportedly agreed on compensation for the families of the victims killed aboard the Gaza flotilla, an issue that has stalled past attempts at reconciliation. However, several crucial issues remain. Turkey demands that Israel ease the Gaza blockade, while Israel demands immunity for Israelis involved in the incident—a deal that would have to be approved by the Turkish parliament.¹¹

President Obama took a personal interest in Turkish-Israeli reconciliation in March 2013, when his visit to Israel culminated in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s apology to Erdoğan, a breakthrough that allowed the two countries to begin negotiating the restoration of relations. Bringing an end to this spat between two of its main Middle Eastern allies would certainly please the United States. Additionally, Erdoğan can spin it as a victory for Turkey in the upcoming elections, saying “that Israel was not only forced to apologize, but pay compensation,” according to Ali Ozcan with the Economic Policy Research Foundation in Ankara.¹² However, this favorable rhetoric has not translated into action thus far. It remains to be seen if the conclusion of the local elections allows additional progress to be made in this area.

CYPRUS

Turkey has also given new momentum to reconciliation in Cyprus, with Davutoğlu expressing his support for renewed diplomatic efforts, saying: “This issue cannot last for years. The talks should not be open-ended and cannot be dragged into a deadlock if one side negatively responds to the talks. Deadlock should not be an alternative. There should be a permanent solution for Cyprus.”¹³ Turkish and Greek Cypriot leaders will meet at a U.N. compound in Nicosia to announce a draft joint statement, the product of several months of renewed negotiations. In response to the joint statement, which says that there will be a single united citizenship of Cyprus, with citizens also belonging to either the Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot constituent states, Davutoğlu said: “I am pleased with the joint statement. I find it satisfactory. It is a communiqué that is also in the interests of the KKTC [Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus] side.”¹⁴

After the release of the joint statement, Turkey intends to continue to play a constructive role in reunification, planning to simultaneously host Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriots in the near future. Turkey’s efforts in Cyprus have been the most fruitful of its recent foreign policy efforts, garnering positive attention from the European Union and the United States. The announcement of the renewed reunification talks reportedly prompted the first phone call between Erdoğan and Obama in six months, in which Obama “thanked the prime minister for his constructive role in the effort on Cyprus to renew negotiations for a settlement.”¹⁵ Turkey’s renewed efforts in Cyprus have the potential to be the most fruitful of its recent foreign policy overtures and, if productive, could remove a longtime impediment to Turkey’s aspirations of EU accession.

Iraq, Egypt, Iran, and Syria: Areas of Contention?

While Turkey's rhetoric toward Cyprus and Israel has become more positive, several of Turkey's regional relationships remain mired in problems and leave Turkey at odds with the United States.

IRAQ

In Iraq, conciliation efforts are deteriorating rapidly. In late 2013, Turkey and Iraq appeared to be investing in new diplomatic efforts to improve their relationship, which was long troubled due to sectarian differences and disputes over Turkey's close energy partnership with the KRG. In October, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari visited Ankara, a visit that Davutoğlu reciprocated in November, seeking to soothe sectarian tensions and to open the door for a tripartite deal among Ankara, Erbil, and Baghdad in which all can benefit from Iraq's natural resources.

However, in early 2014, the momentum generated by those meetings quickly stalled. In January, the KRG announced that crude oil had started to flow through its autonomous pipeline to Turkey and that exports were set to begin soon.¹⁶ In response, Baghdad announced that it would seek legal redress against Erbil and Ankara as well as any foreign companies involved in Kurdish exports of "smuggled" oil.¹⁷ With tensions high and Erbil and Baghdad failing to agree on the division of energy revenues, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's plans to visit Turkey are in limbo, and reconciliation between Turkey's and Iraq's central governments has ground to a halt. In early March, Davutoğlu visited Erbil, and while he encouraged an end to the rift between Erbil and Baghdad, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani took a less conciliatory tone, arguing that the KRG would pursue its interests despite threats from Baghdad.¹⁸

President Obama, in his phone call with Prime Minister Erdoğan, expressed "the importance of encouraging Baghdad and Erbil to find common ground on energy issues and supporting the agreement they achieve."¹⁹ The United States has long been wary of Turkey's separate energy agreements with the KRG, fearing their potential to harm the unity of Iraq. If Turkey continues to pursue an energy-driven relationship with the KRG that excludes Iraq's central government, it will not only continue to damage its relationship with Baghdad, but it will also go against the interests and wishes of its partners in Washington.

EGYPT

One relationship that hasn't seen any efforts at improvement is Turkey's relationship with Egypt. An early backer of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, relations between Turkey and Egypt have devolved, with Turkey stubbornly rallying behind former President Morsi and refusing to acknowledge Egypt's new leadership as legitimate. While the AKP government has changed its rhetoric toward Israel and Cyprus, its relationship with Egypt has continued to fester.

Turkey and Egypt mutually expelled the other's ambassadors in August 2013, in response to Turkey's harsh condemnation of the Egyptian government's violence against pro-Morsi

protestors. The Turkish ambassador returned several weeks later, but Egypt declined to return its ambassador to Ankara unless Turkey moderated its rhetoric. Disagreements between Turkey and Egypt hit a new low point in November 2013, when Egypt once again expelled the Turkish ambassador from Cairo, declaring him *persona non grata* and downgrading diplomatic ties, accusing Turkey of backing organizations “bent on spreading instability,” an oblique reference to the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁰ Turkey soon reciprocated, expelling Egypt’s ambassador from Ankara yet again.

IRAN

In late January, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Tehran for the first time in two years, touting the country as his “second home.” During the visit Turkey and Iran signed a preferential trade deal, an agreement between their state-run news agencies to share news and photographs, as well as the establishment of a High-Level Cooperation Council between Turkey and Iran.²¹ The Turkish government aims to bolster trade with Iran from \$13.8 billion in 2013 to \$30 billion by 2015. However, these plans drew sharp reminders from the U.S. Treasury Department, which cautioned that “Iran is not open for business. Sanctions remain in place and are still quite significant, and businesses that are interested in engaging with Iran really should hold off.”²²

These declarations of friendship and economic agreements come despite the fact that Turkey’s relationship with Iran has suffered as Turkey moved away from “zero problems.” As Turkey became a more sectarian force in the region, a sponsor of Sunni groups, it increasingly began to butt heads with Shia Iran—most notably in Syria, where Iran has been the Assad regime’s biggest sponsor and Turkey has provided extensive support to Sunni opposition factions.

Yet, such rivalry and conflicting policies have not stopped Turkey and Iran from pursuing economic ties. Indeed, the two countries have developed a form of mutual dependency. Turkey is reliant on Iran as one of its main energy providers, and Iran has relied on Turkey as a source of cash despite being under an international sanctions regime. The Turkish corruption scandal brought the nature of this relationship to light, linking four AKP Cabinet ministers with Reza Zarrab, a successful Azeri-Iranian businessman who allegedly helped Iran sell its energy to Turkey in return for gold and bribed Turkish officials to keep his operation secret.²³

When Iran was barred from conducting transactions through SWIFT—the financial communications network maintained by the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication—in March 2012, Turkey and Iran exploited what became known as the “Golden Loophole.” They found a method for bypassing SWIFT and skirting sanctions by conducting transactions in gold. This bullion scheme worked in a circular way, where Iran sold its oil to Turkey and received Turkish lira as payment. Iran would then use these lira to buy Turkish gold, which was then transported by courier from Turkey to Iran.²⁴ While this scheme, in its inception, did not disobey the letter of the international sanctions regime, it certainly did in spirit, allowing Iran to gain billions of dollars in energy revenues. This covert

trade operation was stopped by the United States, which closed the golden loophole in January 2013 through the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act. However, the United States delayed its enforcement until July 2013, which allowed Iran to gain an additional \$13 billion dollars' worth of gold.

In addition to such economic cooperation, Turkey and Iran have also found some common ground on regional cooperation. One potential example is provided by a recently seized arms shipment to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. On March 5, 2014, Israeli naval commandos intercepted the *Klos C*, a Panamanian ship with a Turkish captain sailing from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. On board, the IDF soldiers found dozens of advanced Syrian M-302 missiles, which have a range of up to 125 miles.²⁵ There is no proof of Turkish involvement in this plot, but given AKP support for Hamas it certainly raises questions.²⁶

There appears to be little question that Turkey and Iran are cooperating, however strange it may appear, in Syria, as evidenced by the February 6, 2014, U.S. Treasury terror designation of Olimzhon Adkhamovich Sadikov. Sadikov was identified as a member of an Iran-based al-Qaeda network—active in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Syria—that worked to move fighters into Syria through Turkey and support al-Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria, such as the al-Nusra Front, all with the knowledge of the Iranian government.

The charge that the Iranian government is knowingly allowing al-Qaeda to support the extremist Syrian opposition from its own territory seems paradoxical, as Iran is the Assad regime's largest patron. But cooperation between al-Qaeda and Iran, including a consistently operational al-Qaeda network in Iran, is well documented, dating back to the early 1990s, despite the confessional differences between the two entities.²⁷ More recently, according to the Treasury Department designation the Iranian al-Qaeda network is involved in the Syrian conflict, "organizing and maintaining routes by which new recruits can travel to Syria via Turkey," and facilitating "the transfer of funds from Gulf-based donors to al-Qa'ida core and other affiliated elements, including the al-Nusrah Front in Syria."²⁸

Though the charge of Iran allowing al-Qaeda to operate from within its territory while working at cross-purposes with the Iranian government in Syria may seem paradoxical, recent accounts allege a similar degree of cooperation between the Assad regime and al-Qaeda in Syria. Assad is accused of collaborating with extremist groups in order to solidify his position and to discourage Western support for the opposition by convincing them that the uprising is sponsored by extremists. To this end, Assad unconditionally released al-Qaeda fighters from prison in May 2011, as part of a general amnesty, allowing them to rejoin the fight. Additionally, as oil fields in Syria's eastern province fell to al-Nusra control, the Syrian regime began paying al-Nusra to ensure the continued flow of oil. An intelligence source told *The Telegraph* in early 2014 that "the regime is paying al-Nusra to protect oil and gas pipelines under al-Nusra's control in the north and east of the country, and is also allowing the transport of oil to regime areas."²⁹ Whatever the motivations for Iran or the Assad regime for having dealings with their Sunni extremist foes in Syria, Turkey and the AKP government seem to know about, or even contribute to, these plots.

SYRIA

Once the hallmark of Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy, Turkey's relationship with Syria has devolved since the beginning of the Syrian conflict—and is now Turkey's largest foreign policy challenge. With its Syria policy wildly unpopular at home and having failed to accomplish Erdoğan's stated goal of ousting Assad, Turkey has strayed from its initial policies of giving jihadists unfettered access to the Turkey-Syria border, providing weapons, and opening up territory for the training of extremist fighters bound for Syria.³⁰

January 2014 saw a second round of efforts by major powers to negotiate an end to the conflict in Syria, which has reached its third year. Turkey, which shares its longest land border with Syria and has been laden with the burden of more than 900,000 refugees and spillover of the sectarian fighting, was therefore keenly interested in the Geneva II negotiations. Skeptical of the possibility for a negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis, Turkey had advocated military intervention or negotiations predicated on the premise that Assad must go for much of the past two years. Eventually, however, it softened its position as "the situation is so chaotic that Turkey really has no option left now except to hope that some kind of solution can come out of Geneva."³¹

In a speech during a January 13, 2014, luncheon at the Presidential Palace for Turkish ambassadors, Turkey's president called for a "recalibration" of its Syria policy that takes into consideration "realities that have emerged on our country's southern flank."³² This recalibration involved Turkey not only shifting to support peace talks in Geneva, but also saw it advocating for Iran's participation despite their history of deep animosity on Syria.

However, despite the Turkish government's repeated insistence that it is not affiliated with nor providing arms to extremist groups operating in Syria, recent developments show that the extent of Turkey's clandestine support for the Syrian opposition is greater than was previously known, casting doubt on the rhetoric coming out of Ankara heralding a shift in its Syria policy.

Instead, tension between Syria and Turkey seems to be increasing. Turkey has threatened a cross-border operation into Syria to protect a small Turkey military detachment guarding the Tomb of Suleiman Shah, considered to be the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, which has come under threat by the al-Qaeda affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).³³ Meanwhile, clashes rage on the Turkey-Syria border, with rebels and regime forces fighting for control of the border crossing in Kasab, the last functioning border post in regime control.³⁴

That fighting does not always stay on the Syrian side of border. On March 23, Turkey shot down a Syrian MiG-23 warplane after it strayed into Turkish airspace, a move which Erdoğan described as defending the Turkish state against an "assassin," demonstrating that "if you violate our airspace our next slap will be harder."³⁵ The Turkish military also reported that, on two different occasions, Syrian missile systems "harassed" Turkish fighter jets on routine border patrols by locking onto them for five to ten minutes at a time.³⁶ In response to these developments, President Gül announced that "all units of the Turkish Armed Forces

[TSK] have been put on alert—land, air and naval. We all need to own up to these national issues. These issues are not about politics.”³⁷

Moreover, in the last several months, trucks have repeatedly been stopped on suspicion of smuggling weapons across the border from Turkey into Syria. At least four such trucks have been stopped by Turkish police. In each case, the arms shipment was accompanied by an officer from Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT).³⁸ The most recent incident took place when a total of 935 rocket warheads were seized from a truck in the southern Turkish city of Adana near the Syrian border in early November.³⁹ Turkish authorities believe that the truck carrying the seized rocket warheads and ten launch pads was heading to al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria. Iran’s Fars News Agency reported that the apprehended truck drivers “stressed that they deliver not only weapons and ammunition to what they described as ‘the opposition,’ but all sorts of goods with the knowledge of all Turkey’s officials.”⁴⁰

Prime Minister Erdoğan defended the government by blaming the reports on a Gulenist plot, saying: “With the help of the ‘parallel structure’ there are some attempts to show that Turkey as a country is supporting terrorism [in Syria]. Turkey’s efforts to transfer humanitarian aid [to Syria] have been prevented. While Turkey has been struggling with the [Kurdish terrorist groups, the] PKK and the PYD, while it is struggling with the DHKP/C [Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party/Front], al-Qaeda and al-Nusra, there are some efforts to show that Turkey is arm-in-arm with terrorism [in Syria].”⁴¹

In addition to weapons exports, reported to amount to \$500 million in 2012 alone, Turkey has also been implicated by the U.S. Treasury for allowing al-Qaeda to ship fighters into Syria through its territory, in cooperation with an active al-Qaeda network in Iran.⁴²

While making a rhetorical shift in its Syria policy toward greater cooperation with the Geneva peace process and distancing itself from extremist elements of the Syrian opposition, the ongoing weapons shipment and the February sanctions designations demonstrate that, Turkey apparently remains an active patron of extremist and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria. Moreover, recent proposed changes to the laws governing the MIT aim to make it even easier for Turkey to secretly ship weapons to Syria—by imposing jail sentences on individuals who obtain and disseminate information about MIT activities and by preventing prosecutors from acting on tips about MIT activities, such as the ones that led to the January searches of trucks to Syria.⁴³

Beyond the Neighborhood

While the AKP’s foreign policy has long been heavily focused on cultivating closer ties with its immediate neighbors, the devolution of these relationships has led the AKP to look outside of its region for foreign policy successes—extending the tenets of “zero problems” beyond its neighborhood as it develops new relationships in Africa, changes course in Somalia, and takes a strong stance in the developing crisis in Ukraine.

Demonstrating its commitment to expanding its presence in Africa, Turkey is sending a naval flotilla, known as the Barbaros Turkish Maritime Task Group, on a three-month, west-to-east, 40-port, 28-country circumnavigation of Africa. It will be the first time since 1866 that Turkish ships have rounded the Cape of Good Hope.⁴⁴ With the stated goal of “supporting Turkish foreign policy by demonstrating maritime presence across world seas,” the flotilla will engage in joint exercises with African navies and coast guards in Nigeria, Congo, Angola, South Africa, and Kenya, as well as with the United States in the Gulf of Guinea.

More than just a military exercise—including Turkish defense companies, medical assistance from the Turkish Ministry of Health, and planned diplomatic visits—the deployment is an attempt for Turkey to expand its soft power in Africa and build multilayered relationships on the continent.

NIGERIA

The corruption scandal has given another dimension to Turkey’s recent expansion into Africa—demonstrating that Turkey’s weapons shipments and support for extremist groups extends beyond Syria and Turkey’s immediate neighborhood. Turkey’s national airline carrier has recently been implicated in the international shipment of weapons from Turkey to Nigeria, intended for the Muslim group Boko Haram—a group that is responsible for killing thousands and that is labeled as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government.

In a recording leaked on YouTube, a voice said to belong to Mehmet Karataş, the executive assistant to the CEO of Turkish Airlines, is heard telling another person, said to be Erdoğan’s close advisor Mustafa Varank, that he feels guilty about the transfer of weapons to Nigeria. Karataş says in the recording, “I don’t know whether these [weapons] will kill Muslims or Christians.”⁴⁵ Turkish Airlines, however, denied any involvement in arms transfers, saying it “does not carry arms cargo to countries where there is a lack of authority and clashes, or to countries where [arm imports] are banned by the United Nations Security Council.”⁴⁶

SOMALIA

Turkey has long been an economic patron of Somalia, creating a deep bilateral relationship that saw Prime Minister Erdoğan visit Somalia during the 2011 famine, becoming the first leader of a non-African nation to set foot into the civil-war-plagued nation in nearly two decades.⁴⁷ Following the visit, Turkish Airlines became the first international major airline to run flights to Mogadishu in nearly 20 years. Additionally, Turkey provided extensive support for infrastructure in Somalia, leading Somali president Hasan Sheikh Mohamud to pronounce that the Turks were “changing the face of Mogadishu.” Turkey provided direct budget support to Somalia in the form of direct cash payments to the central bank, reportedly \$4.5 million per month during 2013.⁴⁸

However, this relationship has recently come to a halt, as Turkey stopped its direct budgetary aid to Somalia at the end of 2013. While Somali officials expressed hopes that the payments would resume, a Turkish official said: “We have no such plans at this stage. It is not on our agenda.”⁴⁹ In the wake of the corruption scandal, in which millions of dollars

were found stashed in shoeboxes in the home of Halkbank CEO Suleyman Aslan, attention turned to the means of transporting aid to Somalia—couriers carrying boxes of cash.⁵⁰ The Turkish government has denied claims that its decision to cut off these monthly payments was at all related to the corruption scandal and defends its means of transporting aid as due to the lack of banking apparatuses in Somalia. Additionally, officials have noted that Turkey has not cut all assistance to Somalia, that technical support will continue in 2014

Analysts suggest another potential reason for Turkey to back away from its previous vocal support for the Somali government: protecting itself from attacks by al-Shabab, which has singled out Turkey as being among the countries that “support the apostate regime and seek to suppress the sharia order.”⁵¹ On July 27, 2013, a suicide bombing at the Turkish embassy in Somalia killed three. Earlier al-Shabab attacks targeted Turkish and Somali relief workers, Turkish businessmen in Mogadishu, and Somali students seeking scholarships to study in Turkey.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been embroiled in civil conflict since December 2012, with Muslim rebels seeking to oust the government of President François Bozizé. The international community, in weighing intervention in CAR, has taken steps to determine Turkey’s willingness to participate. EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton sent a letter to Ankara to test the waters on Turkey’s feelings about a planned mission to the conflict zone, and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Prime Minister Erdoğan directly, asking that Turkey contribute troops to be deployed under the European Union’s army coalition rather than as part of a U.N. security force that would take months to deploy.

Although Erdoğan has been slow to give an answer to, reports state that there are continual evaluations of the crisis by the Turkish government to determine if the interim CAR government established in January can provide security to all its citizens, regardless of race or creed. Erdoğan did tell the U.N. that he “pledged Turkey’s support and aid for civilians in CAR.”⁵² Intervention in CAR might allow Turkey to accomplish dual goals: pleasing its Western partners and pleasing its religious base—as intervention could be presented as acting to protect the thousands of Muslims being slaughtered by Christian extremist groups.

UKRAINE

In Europe, Turkey is monitoring the developing Ukrainian crisis, with President Gul asserting, “Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia are three countries neighboring the Black Sea, and that’s why developments in stability and security in the region are a primary concern for Turkey.”⁵³ As events unfold, Turkey has taken an interest in response to concerns over energy resources and the status of the Crimean Tatars, the Turkic Muslims who make up 12 percent of Crimea’s population.

Prime Minister Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke on March 4, 2014, about the developing crisis, with Erdoğan asserting that international law be followed as Russia makes decisive moves. Erdoğan also shared his support for the Ukrainian people and emphasized the importance of their own self-determination. During the conversation, he

insisted that instability in Crimea would hurt all countries around the Black Sea region. "Erdoğan also stressed that Ukraine's territorial integrity and its political unity should be preserved, and tension in Crimea should be erased," according to a statement released Tuesday by the prime minister's office. Russia, however, took a different interpretation of the phone call between Erdoğan and Putin, with the Kremlin's statement declaring, "both sides expressed confidence that, in spite of the aggressive actions by radical and extremist Maidan forces, interethnic and interfaith peace and order will be ensured in Crimea."⁵⁴

At stake for Turkey is its access to natural gas. Turkey has been damaged in the past by energy wars between Russia and Ukraine, and its supplies of natural gas were severely damaged by disputes between the two countries that saw Russia cutting off its gas flows to the European Union via Ukraine. While the European Union has diversified its natural gas suppliers, Turkey did not follow suit and faces today's current events with much of the same infrastructure it had in 2009. Since 2006, Ankara's energy-security vulnerability has helped enhance the country's ties with Russia. While some European countries have become less entwined with Russian energy supplies, Turkey continues to rely on Russian energy company Gazprom for more than half of its natural gas, some 30 percent of which is transported by the West Stream pipeline, which travels through Ukraine.⁵⁵

Turkey's energy dependence has made it unlikely to directly challenge Russia in Syria and will likely temper Turkey's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Turkey has taken an extremely strong stance on Crimea, with Davutoğlu asserting to the former speaker of the Tartar National Assembly that "if the term is appropriate, we are in 'mobilization' to defend the rights of our kin in Crimea by doing whatever is necessary," taking the same stance as the West: that Crimea should remain a part of Ukraine.⁵⁶

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