Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East: power projection and post-ideological politics

KATERINA DALACOURA

Power projection, security, pragmatic considerations, and a disparate mix of national interests and narrower party political objectives have driven the foreign policy of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the Middle East since it came to power in 2002, with ideology playing a variable, auxiliary but none the less significant role. This ideology has consisted of a fluid blend of Islamist, neo-Ottoman and 'civilizationalist' ideas, mingled with a hefty dose of Turkish nationalism. It became more central to policy in the first half of the 2010s, following the Arab uprisings of 2011, but only at some times and in some areas or clusters of relationships. However, it has receded since 2015, when the AKP concluded a political alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), with some foreign policy implications. A confluence of domestic factors—such as the resignation of Ahmet Davutoglu in May 2016 and the attempted coup in July 2016—and regional ones, such as deepening turmoil and conflict across the Middle East, and the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, contributed to emptying Turkey's Middle Eastern policy of ideological content and the onset of a transactional, 'post-ideological' phase.[1]

This article begins by placing the Middle East within the wider context of Turkish foreign policy, comparing it with policies towards other parts of the world. Current policy is also located against the background history of Turkish foreign policy, briefly outlined. The argument takes into account the evolving Middle Eastern regional order, which is also characterized, from a global perspective, by US withdrawal and Russian assertiveness. Turkish policy consists in large part of a series of reactions to developments in the Middle East over which Turkey has little control, particularly given the military conflicts and political turbulence which have marked the recent period. There exists a discernible, if not absolute, dividing line between Turkish policy towards its neighbouring Middle Eastern states of Syria and Iraq—the 'near abroad'—and policy towards the rest of the Middle Eastern region, with the Kurdish dispute defining the former and ideology

[1] I use 'post-ideological' as denoting a phase in which ideological concerns are marginalized by *realpolitik* or other factors. I do not equate ideology exclusively with Islamism, so a 'post-ideological' phase is not equivalent to a 'post-Islamist' phase. 'Transactional' refers to behaviour devoid of values or ideas.

assuming greater prominence (though not dominance) in the latter. The article divides the Middle East into four subregions, demarcated in part geographically and in part in issue terms: the near abroad; the broader Arab world; Israel and the Palestinians; and Iran. It analyses Turkish foreign policy towards each in turn, arguing that power-political considerations have come to predominate in all four over the past five years.[2]

The foreign policy context: increasing clout since the 1990s

My argument's starting point is that the Middle East is not the mainstay of AKP foreign policy, but rather one of a number of regions where it is played out; and that Turkey's engagement there is characterized by trends and phenomena similar to those that apply elsewhere. The Middle East is not Turkey's 'natural' region or the one in which the country 'really' belongs: irrespective of practitioners' pronouncements or beliefs, there exists no such thing in foreign policy, which is by its nature a multifaceted, multilevel and complex realm that does not have a single focus.

Turkey has been progressively more assertive in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War and under the AKP; but so it has also in the Balkans, central Asia, Africa, the Caucasus and Europe. This increased assertiveness is attributable to a combination of internal and external reasons, including the AKP's perceptions of threats and opportunities. The end of the Cold War opened up zones of perceived threat for Turkey, such as the southern border with Iraq and in the Caucasus, which it sought to counter through a security-focused foreign policy. Simultaneously, its governments saw opportunities for economic gain and prestige in central Asia and the Balkans. A transition from the 1980s towards an export-oriented economy and economic

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[2] My article, which does not dismiss ideology but places it within a wider pragmatic context, is in partial agreement with the following studies: Stephen Larrabee, 'Turkey rediscovers the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs* 86: 4, July 2007, pp. 103-114; Malik Mufti, 'The AK Party's Islamic realist political vision: theory and practice', *Politics and Governance* 2: 2, 2014, pp. 28–42; Evren Balta, 'The AKP's foreign policy as populist governance', *Middle East Report*, no. 288, 2018, https://merip.org/2018/12/the-akps-foreign-policy-as-populist-governance/; Eda Kuşkuz-Sönmez, 'Dynamics of change in Turkish foreign policy: evidence from high-level meetings of the AKP government', *Turkish Studies* 20: 3, 2019, pp. 377–402; Hasan Kösebalaban, 'Transformation of Turkish foreign policy toward Syria: the return of securitization', *Middle East Critique* 29: 3, 2020, pp. 335–44.

liberalization brought about greater prosperity (despite setbacks, rising inequality and economic crises such as that of 2001) and the search for markets abroad. With more wealth came more weight—and the willingness to use it. A series of leaders, among them Turgut Özal, Ismail Cem, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ahmet Davutoglu, conceived of Turkey as a rising power, which had or should have the capacity and willingness to throw its weight about. The availability of a range of foreign policy means at the disposal of Turkish governments—the provision of humanitarian assistance abroad, a mediating stance in international conflicts, cultural products such as globally popular soap operas and Yunus Emre educational institutes, a home-grown defence industry—enabled them to pursue an expanding repertoire of objectives. This trend was intensified by the gradual removal of the military, whose foreign policy approach had been more inward-looking and conservative, from playing a direct role in foreign policy. In sum, the availability of new foreign policy means alongside evolving foreign policy ends, and the ability to align them, and a set of new threats and opportunities arising from external structural changes, led to an overall intensification of Turkey's foreign policy activism.[3]

Viewing Turkish foreign policy as multidimensional, multipronged and active in all regions, driven by a combination of push and pull factors, contrasts with an interpretation of it as gliding along a West–East axis (and becoming more 'Middle Eastern'). The latter perspective construes Turkish foreign policy since the time of Özal and especially since the arrival in government of the AKP in 2002 (or from the late 2000s, when the AKP consolidated power and the prospect of EU accession receded) as hovering between two worlds and eventually pursuing a purposeful route—the product of a civilizational and/or political choice—away from the West and in a neo-Ottoman or Islamic direction.

This interpretation, which pervades numerous analyses of Turkish foreign policy generally and Middle Eastern policy particularly,[4] rests on two simplistic, and interconnected, assumptions

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[3] William M. Hale, *Turkish foreign policy since 1774* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

[4] Soner Cagaptay, *The new sultan:Erdogan and the crisis of modern Turkey* (London: Tauris, 2017), and *Erdogan's empire* (London: Tauris, 2019); M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the empire:the politics of neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 179–202; Marwa Maziad and Jake Soteriadis, *Turkey's dangerous new exports: pan-Islamist, neo-Ottoman visions and regional instability* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 2020),

about how foreign policy is made. The first is that foreign policy is run by one person (or a team operating in unison)—and a non-conflicted one at that. For a 'pivot' to occur, it has to be led by someone with a plan. However, such a narrative fails to take account of the complexity of foreign policy, which consists simultaneously of many levels of activity and multiple areas of focus, often operating in contradiction to one another. In the Turkish case, even though Erdogan does dominate foreign policy, and even if he does have an ideological and 'civilizational' project to move Turkey closer to the Muslim world,[5] the foreign policy he runs is constrained by both domestic and external political factors.

The second flawed assumption behind viewing Turkish foreign policy as gliding from West to East is that West and East exist (with 'East' referring most often to 'Islam'), not only in the cultural sense but also as homogeneous entities, both outside Turkey and within it. However, West and East are mythical entities, which at the very least are not completely distinct from one another. Internally, contrary to a narrative which goes back to the late years of the Ottoman empire and continues to be cultivated by both the AKP and its opponents, Turkey is no longer characterized by an East–West fracture, if indeed it ever was. Turkish identity is marked by competing ideas about the definition of the Turkish nation, the meaning of ethnic identity, and the relevance of religion in public and personal life. The same country that has produced strong electoral majorities for the AKP has also consistently polled in favour of joining the EU.[6] In

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https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-dangerous-new-exports-pan-islamist-neo-ottoman-visions-and-regional. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 16 May 2021.)

[5] Ayhan Kaya, 'Oration for the nation in Turkey: from secularisation to re-Islamisation', in Timm Beichelt, Clara Maddalena Frysztacka, Claudia Weber and Susann Worschech, eds, *Ambivalenzen der Europäisierung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2021), pp. 124–8.

[6] In January 2020, 53.7% were in favour of joining the EU compared to 34.7% against and 11.6% who did not have a view on the matter: 'Poll: majority of Turks still favour EU membership', *EU Observer*, 9 Jan. 2020, https://euobserver.com/tickers/147077. In a January 2021 poll, 40.6% of respondents believed that Turkey's foreign policy priorities lay with the US and the EU, compared to 27.6% who felt they lay with Russia and China. See MetroPOLL (Ankara), http://www.metropoll.com.tr/upload/content/files/1887-monthin5numbers-jan21.pdf.

internal politics, diverse identity perceptions are underpinned by a complex social reality. Transnational relations enmesh Turkey in the so-called 'West', especially western Europe, where a large Turkish diaspora lives, and Turkey trades with and is dependent economically on the EU to a greater extent than any other region. Political, economic and cultural ties to the United States are of long standing. Defence cooperation with NATO members is institutionalized, ticking away beneath the headlines, as are bilateral security, intelligence and other institutional partnerships with the EU. Serious tensions and problems between Turkey and the United States and the EU do exist, but a complete parting of the ways is not feasible.[7]

Components of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East up to 2015

The Turkish foreign ministry categorizes the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a distinct region of focus for Turkish foreign policy, comprising all countries from Morocco to Iran and extending to Yemen in the south, but excluding Sudan which is listed under 'sub-Saharan Africa'.[8] MENA is framed by and interlinked with a number of adjacent subregions: the Afghanistan–Pakistan unit, central Asia, the south Caucasus, the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean, and the Horn of Africa.

Turkey was disengaged from the Middle East during the Cold War period. In so far as it was involved, it was through its relationship with the United States. The recognition of Israel in 1949, its accession to NATO in 1952 and its membership of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) all placed Turkey firmly in the western camp and meant that other players in the Middle East considered it as a western ally.

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[7] Similar objections apply in respect of the East, if it is not equated with Islam. In the Turkish political and cultural lexicon, 'the East' can refer to anything non-western and can even mean 'the anti-West'. Recently, 'East' alludes also to Asia or Eurasia. Advocates of Turkey's shift to Eurasia, away from the West or indeed the Middle East, point to Russia, China and Iran as alternatives (for a discussion, see the section of this article on Iran, below). See Emre Erşen, 'The return of Eurasianism in Turkey: relations with Russia and beyond', in Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, eds, *Turkey's pivot to Eurasia: geopolitics and foreign policy in a changing world order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 31–47.

[8] Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Middle East and North Africa* (Ankara, 2020), http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?59f21ff8-791d-4e37-9f39-b4513dfe9399.

This pattern did not change fundamentally, as it is often assumed to have done, with the end of the Cold War;[9] and indeed it is still largely valid today. Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East continued to be wedded to that of the United States (in significant albeit increasingly fractious ways, tensions arising mainly because of differences over the Kurdish issue). The Gulf War of 1991 and the decision to participate in the international, US-led coalition which removed Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, followed by the establishment of a no-fly zone in the northern Kurdish regions of Iraq, placed Turkey, the Kurds and the United States in an uneasy geopolitical triangle. Turkey's military links with Israel in the 1990s countering Syria, which until 1998 harboured the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leadership, harmonized well with US approaches. Exporting to new markets in the Middle East and growing Turkish energy demands caused more involvement with the region; however, European countries remained—as they do to this day—Turkey's predominant economic partners.[10]

For most of the AKP period, Middle East policy was influenced by Ahmet Davutoglu as, successively, foreign policy adviser to Erdogan (2003–2009), foreign minister (2009–2014) and prime minister (2014–2016). He saw Turkey as a rising power which should be active in all regions, but also viewed the Middle East as being a particularly significant arena for the country, given the connection with it through Islam and Turkey's imperial history.[11] He condemned the clash between civilizations, but still perceived East and West in essentialist terms.[12] The

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[9] Tarik Oguzlu, 'Middle Easternization of Turkey's foreign policy: does Turkey dissociate from the West?', *Turkish Studies* 19: 1, 2008, pp. 3–20.

[10] In 2020 Turkey imported €69.9 billion worth of goods from the EU, while its exports to the bloc stood at €62.6 billion. See *Turkey–EU international trade in goods statistics* (Brussels: Eurostat, March 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Turkey-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics#:~:text=by%20Member%20State-,Recent%20developments%2C%20impact%20of%20COVID%2D19,3.4%20billion%20in%20April%202020.

[11] Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayinlari, 2001).

[12] Katerina Dalacoura, 'Global IR, global modernity and civilization in Turkish Islamist thought: a critique of culturalism in International Relations', *International Politics* 58 2021, p. 143.

allusions to history in Davutoglu's work, and the positive rereading of Turkey's Ottoman past engineered by the AKP domestically, led to the depiction of Turkey's policies in the Middle East—and in the Balkans—as 'neo-Ottoman'.[13] The AKP under Davutoglu fused a civilizational discourse with the notion of Turkish leadership of the Muslim world in a 'Turkey first' policy that blended religious identity and Turkish nationalism.

Alongside these grand schemes, however, Davutoglu devised a more pragmatic 'no problems with neighbours' policy which shaped relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran and other neighbours beyond the Middle East.[14] This, in turn, ended with the Arab uprisings of 2011 and more definitively with the onset of civil war in Syria. The uprisings initiated a period of greater activism and political interference by Turkey in the Middle East region. Rapid political change in a number of Arab countries seemed to offer new opportunities for the AKP, with Egypt being the linchpin of its strategy of expanding influence. Political change also opened up space for the Islamist elements in the AKP's ideology to come to the fore, channelled through the party's personal and institutional relationships with Islamist actors in the Middle East. These relationships were long-established, but after 2011 they took centre stage in Turkey's external relations because of the political successes of Islamist parties. Even so, not all Turkey's reactions to the 2011 uprisings were defined by these Islamist proclivities: for example, Erdogan hesitated in applauding the popular challenge to the Gaddafi regime in 2011, because of Turkish economic interests and the large number of Turkish workers in Libya. But this was quickly overtaken, in Libya and elsewhere, by the expectation (though this was not official policy) that the AKP model and ideology would spread in the Middle East, and that the Turkish government intended 'to direct the great transformation wave in the Middle East'.[15]

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[13] See works cited in n. 4.

[14] Hasan Kösebalaban, *Turkish foreign policy: Islam, nationalism, and globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 174–86.

[15] Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 April 2012, quoted in Mufti, 'The AK Party's Islamic realist political vision', p. 38. There is no consensus on what the 'AKP model' is, but it usually refers to a movement which derives legitimacy through popular majoritarian democratic means; chooses gradual Islamization rather than revolutionary action; is socially conservative; and favours the free market in its economic orientation. This 'ideal-type' definition does not describe

A mere couple of years after 2011, however, Turkish foreign policy in those parts of the Middle East affected by the uprisings started going into reverse gear. Thise was caused in part by regional factors (to be explored in the rest of the article) and in part by domestic political developments. The AKP's loss of electoral support in the June 2015 elections and its alliance with the ultra-nationalist MHP contributed to the end of the Kurdish peace process and the resumption of hostilities in the south-east, pushing the AKP towards the 'revisionist, militarised, assertive and self-reliant approach to Turkey's external relations' the MHP had long championed.[16] Davutoglu's resignation in May 2016 aided the shift towards a more transactional foreign policy, away from the ideological one promoted under his aegis. The attempted coup of July 2016 accelerated the drive towards authoritarianism and soured the AKP's relations with the United States and European states.

With the introduction of the new presidential system in 2018, an already overly centralized foreign policy process became even more highly personalized, with institutional openings for dissent becoming scarce as new bodies became satellites of Erdogan and his advisers.[17] Parliament and the foreign ministry were further excluded from the formation and oversight of policy. The military, which had lost its foreign policy role after the Ergenekon trials (2008–2013), fell even more closely into line after the coup attempt.

The 'near abroad': Syria and Iraq

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the reality of authoritarianism and personalized rule that has characterized AKP politics, particularly in recent years. See Monica Marks, 'Tunisia's Islamists and the "Turkish model"', *Journal of Democracy* 28: 1, 2017, pp. 102–15; Muhammad Muddassir Quamar, 'AKP, the Arab Spring and the unravelling of the Turkey "model"', *Strategic Analysis* 42: 4, 2018, pp. 364–76.

[16] Bill Park, 'Know your place; what lies behind Turkey's current foreign policy behaviour?', *Platform Peace and Justice*, 12 Aug. 2020, http://www.platformpj.org/know-your-place-what-lies-behind-turkeys-current-foreign-policy-behaviour/ .

[17] Siri Neset, Mustafa Aydın, Hasret Dikici Bilgin, Metin Gürcan and Arne Strand, *Turkish foreign policy: structures and decision-making processes*, CMI report R2019 (Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2019), https://www.cmi.no/publications/6854-turkish-foreign-policy-structures-and-decision-making-processes.

The long history of relations between the AKP and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had been overshadowed, before 2011, by improving Turkish–Syrian ties under the 'no problems with neighbours' policy.[18] The policy was abandoned with the outbreak of the Syrian rebellion, and the AKP government took up the cause of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, deeming it the prospective leader of the anti-Assad opposition.[19] However, it became apparent from as early as 2012–2013 that the Brotherhood could not play this role because it lacked widespread support in Syria; and, as violence deepened, it was superseded by more radical, military actors. As the twin threats, for Turkey, of ISIS and the Kurdish movement started appearing in Syria from 2014–2015 (with the former initially emerging in Iraq), security and defence interests overshadowed ideology. This led Ankara to support more extreme, militarily effective, Islamist groups and eventually to intervene in Syria, while also engaging in give and take with its opponents there (Russia and Iran).[20] In Turkish policy towards Iraq, ideological concerns were not paramount at any point, at least not in any major way; the main focus for Turkey in Iraq has always been the Kurdish issue, albeit with constantly changing parameters, and security considerations have habitually prevailed in its handling.

Domestic Turkish changes in respect of the Kurdish issue combined with the rising position of the Syrian Kurds to cause a shift in Turkish policy in Syria from 2014–2015.[21] The AKP had led a political opening towards the Kurds in Turkey between 2009 and 2011. Violence resumed in 2011, but from 2013 another phase of conciliation began. However, the two sides were not

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[18] Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür, *Turkey–Syria relations: between enmity and amity* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2013).

[19] Bulut Gürpinar, 'Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood: crossing roads in Syria', *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences* 3: 4, 2015, pp. 22–36.

[20] Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 341–64.

[21] Leila Vignal, 'The changing borders and borderlands of Syria in a time of conflict', *International Affairs* 93: 4, 2017, pp. 809–28' Asli S. Okyay, 'Turkey's post-2011 approach to its Syrian border and its implications for domestic politics', *International Affairs* 93: 4, 2017, pp. 859–46; Johannes Jude, 'Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto state', *International Affairs* 93: 4, 2017, pp. 847–64.

reconciled, and there was acrimony by the time of the June 2015 elections.[22] As noted above, the AKP's loss of its parliamentary majority in that poll pushed it to align with the MHP to augment electoral gains—a move that effectively killed the peace process with the Kurds. By the November 2015 elections, which returned an AKP majority, violent exchanges with the PKK had resumed, and the AKP had moved towards a more traditional interpretation of Turkish nationalism in its internal politics which privileged ethnic homogeneity.[23] In Syria, meanwhile, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) established by the PKK in 2003, became the main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighting Assad, which also included Arab and Syriac groups. From November 2013, three Kurdish self-governing provinces, collectively named 'Rojava', were established in Syria, and by 2015 Turkey faced an autonomous Kurdish entity on its southern border.

The rise of ISIS in 2014, first in Iraq and then in Syria, constituted a threat for Turkey both directly and indirectly, by strengthening the Kurds in Syria. The Assad regime gave space to the YPG in the north of the country to fight ISIS. ISIS also became a preoccupation for the United States which—unwilling to commit more boots on the ground—turned to the YPG-led SDF to defeat it. Turkey initially kept aloof from the anti-ISIS coalition being assembled by the United States (standing aside during the siege of Kobane in late 2014) but after the suicide bombing in Suruç, a Turkish city, by an ISIS recruit in July 2015, committed itself to the US-led anti-ISIS effort. With Russia's entry into the war in September 2015 on the side of Assad and its hints of support for the YPG, the tables turned against Turkey, which was now confronted with three enemies in Syria: ISIS, the Kurds and Assad's forces.

These developments—and the pressure of Syrian refugees in Turkey, who amounted to a total of 3.6 million officially registered by 2021[24]—pulled Turkey further into the quagmire of the Syrian civil war and caused it to shed ideological concerns and intervene militarily, at first through

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[22] Bill Park, 'Regional turmoil, the rise of Islamic State, and Turkey's multiple Kurdish dilemmas', *International Journal* 91: 3, 2016, pp. 14–15.

[23] Okyay, 'Turkey's post-2011 approach to its Syrian border'.

[24] UN High Commission for Refugees, *Refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey* (New York, 2021), https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey.

proxies and later directly.[25] As the prospect of the moderate Islamist opposition prevailing evaporated, Turkey turned to jihadist forces, among them the Syrian National Army, one of a series of military formations Ankara sponsored in 2017–2018, which was created through the merging of the Free Syrian Army (originally set up in 2011) with the National Front for Liberation. Three military interventions were carried out to create safe havens or buffer zones in northern Syria. In August 2016, operation Euphrates Shield aimed to prevent the SDF, led by the YPG, from linking Afrin and Manjib territorially. In early 2018, operation Olive Branch against Afrin, a historically Kurdish enclave, expelled the YPG and established Turkish control. Finally, operation Peace Spring took place after US President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of US forces from Syria in October 2019. A non-contiguous territory comprising Tel Abyad, Jarablus and Afrin was carved out after these incursions, and by 2020 Turkey controlled, with the Syrian National Army, a 'safe zone' south of its border extending 30 kilometres into Syria, as a buffer zone against Assad's forces and the Kurdish-led SDF. Turkish forces also militarily oversee the Idlib governorate (ruled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which includes Jahbat Al-Nusra, linked to Al-Qaeda) to prevent Assad forces from over-running it.[26]

The gradual abandonment of ideological ambitions by Turkey was also impelled by its realization that it could not defeat the Assad regime and that it would have to compromise with Assad's backers, Russia and Iran. After patching up relations with Russia in 2016 (damaged by the shooting down of a Russian aircraft in November 2015), Ankara partially collaborated with Moscow not only in military affairs but also in the Astana peace process which Russia and Iran sponsored from January 2017. There was consultation, reputedly, with Russia before Operation

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[25] They also led to the instrumentalization of the Turkmen minority in Syria. See Radiye Funda Karadeniz, 'Turkey and Syrian Turkomans in the "new Middle East Cold War": a critical view from the kin-state', in Hazal Papuççular and Deniz Kuru, eds, *A transnational account of Turkish foreign policy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 143–73.

[26] Asli Aydintaşbaş, *A new Gaza: Turkey's border policy in northern Syria* (Berlin and London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), pp. 7–8, https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_new_gaza_turkeys_border_policy_in_northern_syria/. Aydintaşbaş argues (pp. 2, 11–14) that Turkish policies in northern Syria constitute 'social engineering' and 'a quiet revolution' in foreign policy, driven by neo-Ottoman designs.

Euphrates Shield was launched in August 2016.[27] Turkey agreed with Russia in 2019 to eliminate terrorist groups in Idlib, though this had not happened as of April 2021. A similar pattern, of partial, pragmatic collaboration with an ideological rival, can be observed in Turkey's relations with Iran, as we shall see in the last section of this article.[28]

Turkey's policy towards Iraq has been guided by security concerns, centring on the Kurdish issue; ideological considerations have never been paramount, with a sole exception: the attempt to promote Sunni political parties following the US invasion of 2003. This resulted in tension with Iran, which backed Shi'a parties in Baghdad during the 2000s. Tension with Baghdad was also exacerbated by Ankara's courting of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) after 2008 and its forging a close relationship particularly with Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Energy and trade form a significant part of this relationship, exemplified in the central significance of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline.

The parameters for all parties changed when ISIS, which first emerged in Iraq, attacked the KRG and conquered Mosul and other parts of northern Iraq in June 2014, before spreading to Syria. The KRG was not supportive of the PYD/YPG in Syria, which was on the rise at the same time as ISIS. However, Turkey became alarmed as western countries became increasingly reliant on the KRG in the anti-ISIS war, increasing its political salience.[29] To counterbalance this, Turkey turned its attention to the Turkmen minority and the status of Kirkuk. The delicate balancing act in Ankara's policy towards the KRG, with which it had cause for both cooperation and conflict, was complicated by Barzani's decision to hold an independence referendum in September 2017 (which also alarmed Iran, as we shall see below).[30] The continuing presence of the PKK in

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[27] Şener Aktürk, 'Turkey's role in the Arab spring and the Syria conflict', *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 15: 4, Winter 2017, p. 94.

[28] It is worth reiterating here that, despite Turkey's partial collaboration with Russia and Iran, Turkey and the United States and the EU continued on the same side in the Syrian civil war. Turkey requested NATO support in 2012 and 2015 to protect its Syrian border.

[29] Park, 'Regional turmoil, the rise of Islamic State', pp. 460–61.

[30] Şaban Kardaş, 'Transformation of Turkey's regional policies', *International Spectator* 53: 4, 2018, pp. 16–34.

northern Iraq led to military incursions by Turkey from the summer of 2020 onwards, reputedly with the KDP's tacit permission.[31]

The Arab terrain

Ideological preferences—mostly in favour of Islamist groups of a Muslim Brotherhood orientation—did inform Turkish foreign policy in the Arab world beyond Syria for a few years after the 2011 uprisings; but their influence, such as it was, declined after the middle of that decade. The end of the Muslim Brotherhood's and other moderate Islamists' brief political ascendancy, and the growing clout of their opponents such as the regimes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, contributed to the shift.[32] The only country in the Middle East with which Turkey has good relations is Qatar. Turkey's appeal to domestic Arab publics has also declined. The search for energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean has diverted Ankara's attention further away from ideology in search of pragmatic alliances. Turkey now seeks to project military power (underpinned by an expanding internal defence industry[33]) not only in Libya but also in Qatar and, on the edges of the Arab world, in Sudan and Somalia, where it has military facilities.[34]

[31] Fehim Taştekin, 'Turkey turns up heat on PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan', *Al-Monitor*, Nov. 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/11/turkey-iraq-kurdistan-region-specter-intra-kurdish-feud-rise.html.

[32] Rory Miller and Sarah Cardaun, 'Multinational security coalitions and the limits of middle power activism in the Middle East: the Saudi case', *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1509–25.

[33] Özge Özdemir, 'IHA Ve SIHA üretiminde Türkiye dünyada yükselen bir güç mü?', BBC Türkçe, 20 Oct. 2020, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-54533620.

[34] Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon, 'Re-examining the "base": the political and security dimensions of Turkey's military presence in Somalia', *Insight Turkey* 21: 1, 2019, pp. 167–88, https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1122/re-examining-the-base-the-political-and-security-dimensions-of-turkeys-military-presence-in-somalia.

The 2011 Arab uprisings appeared, in their immediate aftermath, to open up political opportunities in the Arab world for Turkey and the AKP.[35] The regimes in Egypt and Tunisia collapsed relatively peacefully, the challenge to Bahrain's monarchy was suppressed, while in Libya, Syria and Yemen, rebellions resulted in civil war; other regimes, such as those in Morocco, Jordan and even Saudi Arabia and Oman, were also affected by internal protests. In these events, Erdogan saw an opportunity to promote a leadership role for himself and boost Turkey's regional and global standing.

The AKP pursued its leadership ambitions by connecting with Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood which rose to prominence after 2011.[36] There was, however, no complete ideological agreement between the AKP and these movements. For instance, in his visit to Egypt in September 2011 after the fall of the Mubarak regime, Erdogan upset the Brotherhood by advocating 'a laicist constitution in the new post-Mubarak Egypt'.[37] Nonetheless, the AKP has long supported Islamist movements that campaign for an Islamic state, and its ideological and institutional links with Brotherhood-affiliated movements go back to the Cold War. The AKP and Brotherhood groups have come to share an espousal of 'democracy' interpreted in a narrowly electoral and majoritarian way that represents the antithesis of the democratic spirit and can lead to illiberal and populist outcomes. In what can be construed as a continuation of Orientalist thinking, the AKP standpoint after 2011 was that a democratic opening in the Arab world would bring Islamist movements to power because, like the AKP, they would be the natural choice of 'the people', who are Muslims above everything else; democracy would thereby end the historical alienation between the people and the elites.[38] As a result, the AKP

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[35] Ziya Öniş, 'Turkey and the Arab revolutions: boundaries of regional power influence in a turbulent Middle East', *Mediterranean Politics* 19: 2, 2014, pp. 203–19.

[36] Birol Başkan, 'Islamism and Turkey's foreign policy during the Arab Spring', *Turkish Studies* 19: 2, 2018, pp. 264–88.

[37] Kuibilay Aydin, 'Erdogan: laiklik ateizm degildir, korkmayin', *Sözcü*, 12 Aug. 2018, https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2016/gundem/Erdogan-laiklik-ateizm-degildir-korkmayin-1202212/.

[38] Birol Başkan, 'Islamism and Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring', *Turkish Studies* 19: 2, 2018, p. 280.

rushed to support the Brotherhood and other Islamist movements not only in Syria, as noted above, but also in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere.

The ideological, 'Islamist' phase of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East, however (in so far as it was any such thing, given that ideology did not dominate foreign policy), started to peter out as it became apparent that Islamist political parties would not entrench themselves in power, as the AKP had hoped. The first and hardest blow was the overthrow of the Egyptian government of Mohammed Morsi, backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, in a military (albeit widely popular) coup carried out by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in August 2013.[39] In Syria, as noted above, the initial stage of the uprising did not put the Muslim Brotherhood in a leading position in the rebellion, despite Turkish support. In Tunisia, the Nahda movement became a key player in the elections after the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, but its popularity diminished in subsequent elections, as political participation revealed its flaws to the public. In Libya, the Muslim Brotherhood did not achieve pole position after Gaddafi's downfall; it did become one component in the government of national accord (GNA) of Fayez al-Sarraj, formed in 2015, but its position was weakened when it joined the national unity government in March 2021.[40] All in all, over time the Middle East became less hospitable to the AKP message, and the popularity of the AKP as a party political model, and of Erdogan personally, waned.[41]

Turkey's support of Brotherhood movements in the Arab world pitted it, together with Qatar, in an ideological confrontation against a rival coalition consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt—albeit one that turned, by the late 2010s, into a naked struggle for power in which ideas

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[39] Bugra Süsler, *Turkey, the EU and the Middle East: foreign policy cooperation and the Arab uprising* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 153–5.

[40] Sarah Vernhes, 'Libya: Haftar and Muslim Brotherhood big losers of new government', *Africa Report*, 18 March 2021, https://www.theafricareport.com/72259/libya-haftar-and-muslim-brotherhood-big-losers-of-new-government/.

[41] Jacob Poushter, *Support for Turkey's Erdogan drops sharply in Middle East* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 30 July 2014), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/30/support-for-turkeys-Erdogan-drops-sharply-in-middle-east/; 'The Arab world in seven charts: are Arabs turning their backs on religion?', BBC News, 23 June 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377.

and ideals were marginalized. Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not favour the popularly charged, politicized model of Islamism advocated by Turkey's AKP government and Qatar, and embodied in the Brotherhood. The struggle assumed political forms, each side trying to buttress its acolytes with money or arms within their respective domestic contexts. Turkey helped Qatar against the embargo imposed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in June 2017 by boosting its military presence there. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Brotherhood branch and Hamas (to be discussed in the next section) acquired safe haven and offices in Istanbul. In Syria, the Gulf states and Turkey, while all opposed to the Assad regime, sometimes backed different groups. In the post-2018 Libyan civil war, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt threw their weight behind General Khalifa Haftar's challenge to the GNA, which was assisted by direct Turkish military intervention in 2019–2020. Further afield, in Sudan, the overthrow in 2019 of the Omar al-Bashir government, which had been supported by Ankara, allowed Saudi Arabia and the UAE to sideline Turkey.[42] By the late 2010s, Turkey's weakened regional position—with Qatar's opening to Saudi Arabia contributing to Ankara's diplomatic isolation,[43] as did its behaviour in the eastern Mediterranean (to be discussed in the next section)—pushed it even more towards transactional policies.

Israel and the Palestinians

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[42] Gizem Sucuoğlu and Jason Stearns, *Turkey in Somalia: shifting paradigms of aid* (New York: New York University Center on International Cooperation, 2016); Micha'el Tanchum, *Turkey's string of pearls: Turkey's overseas naval installations reconfigure the security architecture of Mediterranean–Red Sea corridor*, FOKUS, no. 4 (Hainburg/Donau: Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik, 2019), https://www.aies.at/download/2019/AIES-Fokus-2019-04.pdf; Michael Young, 'Heir to the Ottomans', *Diwan* (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 16 Oct. 2020), https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82971; Federico Donelli, *Turkey in Africa: Turkey's strategic involvement in sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Federico Donelli and Ariel Gonzalez-Levaggi, 'Crossing roads: the Middle East's security engagement in the Horn of Africa', *Global Change, Peace and Security* 33: 1, 2021, pp. 45–60.

[43] Semih Idiz, 'Turkey more diplomatically isolated than ever in Arab World', *Al-Monitor*, 18 Sept. 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/09/turkey-israel-uae-deal-ankara-became-bane-of-arab-regimes.html.

The relationship between Turkey and Israel, which was a good one in the period immediately after the Second World War, had collapsed by the end of the 2010s and has been only partially restored since 2016. Ideological differences caused its breakdown, but a commonality of economic and geopolitical interests underpin its continuation. Following the end of the Cold War, as noted above, the military partnership between Ankara and Tel Aviv to counter Syria and Iran was an aspect of their mutually close relations with the United States. The relationship did not change fundamentally in the first years of AKP government, and Turkey even tried to mediate between Syria and Israel at that point.[44] But it deteriorated from 2008, when Turkey vehemently condemned Israel over the Gaza war, and in January 2009 Erdogan took the emotive step of walking out of a televised panel discussion with Shimon Peres. Rupture ensued with the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010 which led to the death of ten Turkish citizens when Israeli commandoes boarded a flotilla as it tried to breach the blockade of Gaza. Turkey's support for political transitions in the post-2011 Middle East also pitted it against Israel.[45] Links were re-established after the Israeli apology for Mavi Marmara in March 2013, and then with the June 2016 reconciliation agreement, but they remain frosty and unstable.

One explanation for the enduring chill is the longstanding relationship between the AKP and Hamas, which stems in part from the fact that Hamas is a Muslim Brotherhood organization. Hamas's electoral victory in 2006 against Fatah, and the democratic legitimacy that outcome seemingly bestowed (notwithstanding the movement's authoritarian and violent bent), followed by its take-over of power in Gaza, was further confirmation in the eyes of the AKP of the enduring link between Islamism and 'the people' and provided justification of its support for the movement. The visit to the AKP party conference by Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in February 2009 illustrated the Turkish governing party's willingness to take the side of a hard-line Islamist movement that was tarnished with the 'terrorist' label and to put itself on a collision course with Israel, the United States and European states. Hamas has had a base in Istanbul since 2012, many

[44] Ilker Aytürk, 'The coming of an ice age? Turkish–Israeli relations since 2002', *Turkish Studies* 12: 4, 2011, pp. 675–87.

[45] Hasan Kösebalaban, 'Turkey and the new Middle East: between liberalism and realism', *Perceptions* 16: 3, 2011, pp. 93–114.

of its operatives are able to travel through and stay in Turkey, and the Turkish government has hosted visits by Hamas leaders on many occasions, most recently in August 2020.[46]

Despite the AKP's closeness to Hamas, however, interpreting its wider support for the Palestinians and critical stance towards Israeli policies as an expression of Islamist ideology would be too narrow an interpretation. The espousal of the legitimate cause of Palestinian national self-determination, and condemnation of the illegal Israeli occupation and settler policies, is not exclusive to Islamists in the Middle East (or indeed anywhere else); it is shared by people on the left of the political spectrum and centrist liberals. Religious sympathies may have sharpened Turkey's arguments with Israel, but did not create them.[47] Turkey has also cultivated ties with the Palestinian Authority despite its close relations with Hamas.[48]

Having said that, there are also instrumental reasons for the AKP's support of the Palestinian cause. It is part and parcel of Erdogan's bid to 'lead' the Muslim world, for which it is a major issue, at least rhetorically. In recent years, as Gulf states have moved further towards viewing Iran, rather than Israel, as their major enemy, Turkey has taken on the mantle of defender of the Palestinians (at some cost to its relations with the United States, which was especially close to

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[46] Anshel Pfeffer, 'Hamas uses secret cyberwar base in Turkey to target enemies', *The Times*, 22 Oct. 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hamas-running-secret-cyberwar-hq-in-turkey29mz50sxs?shareToken=6055f413208f54be70c104e1ee8d25f7.

[47] William Hale, 'Reassessing Turkey's relationships with its neighbours', in Michális S. Michael, ed., *Reconciling cultural and political identities in a globalized world: perspectives on Australia–Turkey relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). But it may also be that 'the decline of the secularist ethos' in both Turkey and Israel, and the rise of ultra-nationalism and religious politics, have had a negative impact on bilateral relations: see Umut Uzer, 'The new Jew and the new Turk: a comparative analysis of Israeli and Turkish nation-building within the framework of religion, modernity and secularism', in Ayşegül Sever and Orna Almog, eds, *Contemporary Israeli–Turkish relations in comparative perspective* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 11–38.

[48] Adnan Abu Amer, 'Turkey steps up ties with Palestinian Authority', *Al-Monitor*, 3 Oct. 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/10/turkey-balancing-ties-hamas-palestinian-authority-agreements.html.

Israel under Trump), reacting sharply, for example, to the normalization of ties with Israel by Bahrain, Morocco and the UAE in 2020. The Turkish view of Israel is also shaped by the conflict in the eastern Mediterranean, specifically Israel's alignment with Greece and Cyprus against Turkey over gas exploitation. Egypt, locked in rivalry with Turkey for other reasons, is part of the Israel–Greece–Cyprus camp.[49]

Notwithstanding all these tensions and divisions, however, Turkey's policy towards Israel has become more pragmatic and conciliatory over the past few years, more so since the June 2016 agreement between the two countries.[50] The departure of Davutoglu and his replacement by Binali Yildirim in May 2016 may have helped improve relations, but a more significant driver of the repair lay in mutual Israeli and Turkish concerns about instability in the region, especially in Syria.[51] Turkey sought at least partial reconciliation with Israel as its relations with Saudi Arabia soured. It also saw Israel as a possible alternative provider of natural gas to reduce dependence on Russia and Iran.[52] Israel did not achieve the elimination of Turkish support for Hamas or the removal of its headquarters and activists from Turkish territory in the June 2016 deal.[53] But the accord was 'a triumph of pragmatism over ideology', which Turkey signed despite the continuing Israeli siege of Gaza and notwithstanding its continuing anti-Israeli rhetoric,[54] which flared up again over the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017. The partial *rapprochement* was facilitated by strong commercial and, to a degree, cultural relations between the two countries, which had survived the breakdown of diplomatic and political relations: bilateral trade increased steadily between 2008 and 2019, and the decline in the

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[49] Burcu Özcelik, 'Hydrocarbon diplomacy: Turkey's gambit might yet pay a peace dividend', *War on the Rocks*, 30 Jan. 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/hydrocarbon-diplomacy-turkeys-gambit-might-yet-pay-a-peace-dividend/.

[50] Ayşegül Sever and Orna Almog, 'The Mavi Marmara: an embattled voyage and its consequences', in Sever and Almog, eds, *Contemporary Israeli–Turkish relations*, pp. 61–100.

[51] Sever and Almog, 'The Mavi Marmara', pp. 86–7.

[52] 'Israel and Turkey reach deal to restore relations', Al Jazeera, 26 June 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/6/26/israel-and-turkey-reach-deal-to-restore-relations.

[53] Sever and Almog, 'The Mavi Marmara', p. 92.

[54] Sever and Almog, 'The Mavi Marmara', pp. 88, 90, 92.

number of Israeli tourists visiting Turkey was reversed after 2019.[55] By the time of writing, in April 2021, diplomatic relations had been fully normalized.

Iran

Following the 2011 uprisings, Iran and Turkey both hoped that Arab citizenries would opt for their respective political models and bolster their bids for regional leadership. Both were to be disappointed; but the pursuit of their ideological ambitions fuelled a regional rivalry between them, which unfolded alongside the Turkish–Saudi competition over the Muslim Brotherhood, discussed above. This ideological rivalry was gradually transformed, from the mid-2010s, into an overt power-political confrontation, both in Syria and in the wider Middle East. Simultaneously, in other areas such as Kurdish affairs and trade relations, especially energy, mutual interests ensured a lasting cooperation. Furthermore, Iran—this time as part of Eurasia, not the Middle East, and alongside Russia and China—was increasingly depicted by some foreign policy ideologues in Turkey as offering an alternative to the West.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran had only a minor impact on Turkish Islamists (with the exception of some individual Islamist figures and violent organizations).[56] This is not so much because Turkey is a predominantly Sunni country and Iran mostly a Shi'a one—Khomeini, after all, preached a message on behalf of all Muslims and even of all the 'downtrodden'—as because of disagreements over the contours of the ideal Islamic society. The divergence became even wider when AKP disowned the description 'Islamist' altogether, favouring 'Muslim conservative' at the moment of its creation in 2001. Improved relations between Turkey and Iran in the AKP's first decade cannot, therefore, be straightforwardly reduced to ideological affinity,[57] and it must be reiterated that Turkey under the

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[55] Paul Rivlin, 'Economic relations between Israel and Turkey', in Sever and Almog, eds, *Contemporary Israeli–Turkish relations*, pp. 177–93; Henri J. Barkey and Ellen Laipson, 'The prospects for conflict or cooperation: will the eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries lead to regional transformation?, *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Summer 2020, https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/the-prospects-for-conflict-or-cooperation/.

[56] Menderes Çinar, personal communication, 17 April 2021.

[57] Zenonas Tziarras, *Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East under the AKP (2002–2013): a neoclassical realist account*, PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2014, pp. 176–82.

AKP has remained a member of NATO, the US-led western alliance—with direct military implications for Iran[58]—while anti-Americanism remains the cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy. Jenkins's apt observation still stands: religious solidarity 'rapidly disappears when it comes to bilateral relations within the region—where the AKP has always seen Iran as a rival rather than a partner, not only in terms of political influence but also ideologically'.[59] The AKP redressed the relative neglect of the Middle East by previous Turkish governments, but this meant improving relations with Muslim-majority countries with a range of different political systems, such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Qatar, not only Islamist ones such as Iran.[60] Turkey and Iran entered on a collision course after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which led to the ascendancy of Iran in that country. Turkey's support for the KRG, for reasons linked to its domestic handling of the Kurdish issue (and its desire to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and Iran by turning instead to the KRG), pitted it against the Iran-backed Baghdad government, with which Ankara's relations gradually deteriorated.[61] But links between Turkey and Iran were

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[58] For instance, in September 2011 a NATO anti-ballistic missile system targeting Iran was installed at Kürecik, east of Malatya. See Ioannis Grigoriadis, *Learning from the 'Arab Spring': Turkish foreign policy in flux*, working paper no. 32 (Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, 2013) http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/32_2013_-WORKING-PAPER-_Ioannis-Grigoriadis.pdf.

[59] Gareth H. Jenkins, *Occasional allies, enduring rivals: Turkey's relations with Iran*, Silk Road paper (Washington DC: Johns Hopkins University/School for Advanced International Studies, and Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, May 2012), p. 70, https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2012_05_SRP_Jenkins_Turkey-Iran.pdf.

[60] Ahmet T. Kuru, 'Turkey's failed policy toward the Arab Spring: three levels of analysis', *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26: 3, 2015, p. 97.

[61] Gülriz Şen, 'Dynamics of estrangement and realignment in Turkey–Iran relations in the 2000s: exploring the US dimension', in Erşen and Köstem, eds, *Turkey's pivot to Eurasia*, pp. 147–65.

sustained in other areas. In 2010 Turkey, with Brazil, mediated (albeit unsuccessfully) in the Iran nuclear dispute.[62]

The 2011 uprisings upset relations between Ankara and Tehran, at least on one level.[63] The ideological rivalry played out in Syria, the main bone of contention between the two countries, with each side intervening directly or through proxies. Concurrently, tensions continued in Iraq and in the wider Middle East (and the Caucasus).[64] Iran accused Turkey of having neo-Ottoman designs to increase its regional influence.[65] We saw above that there were ideological differences and competition between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, but both countries opposed Iran and its ideological allies, such as Hezbollah—although there is, admittedly, some fluidity in this: for example, the Qatar crisis from June 2017 onwards brought Turkey and Iran closer.[66] Iran and Turkey support Hamas but also compete over it.[67]

As the 2010s progressed, however, the competition between Turkey and Iran became less ideological and more overtly political—which in turn opened the door to compromise. With the conflict in Syria deepening and becoming more protracted, what started as a clash with a strong

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[62] Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi and Şuhnaz Yilmaz, 'The precarious role of emerging powers in a transforming international order: Brazilian and Turkish initiative for a nuclear deal with Iran', *International Politics* 56: 4, 2019, pp. 457–76.

[63] Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, 'Iran and Turkey: not quite enemies but less than friends', *Third World Quarterly* 38: 4, 2017, pp. 980–95.

[64] There is conflict in Lebanon, for example, where Turkey is hostile towards Hezbollah and has good relations with Salafi elements: Young, 'Heir to the Ottomans'.

[65] Meliha Benli Altunışık, 'Iran–Turkey relations: between rivalry and competition', in Imad Mansour and William R. Thompson, eds, *Shocks and rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), p. 139.

[66] Vahid Yücesoy, 'The recent rapprochement between Iran and Turkey: is it durable or is it a relationship of convenience?', *Turkish Studies* 21: 2, 2020, pp. 274–96.

[67] Gallia Lindenstrauss, 'Turkey and Iran: two regional powers and the relations pendulum', in Meir Litvak, Emily B. Landau and Ephraim Kam, eds, *Iran in a changing strategic environment* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2018), pp. 58–9.

ideological element became a struggle for power.[68] The rise of ISIS and the YPG in 2014–2015 created a convergence of interest between Iran and Turkey. As we have seen, the threat from the two movements dampened Turkey's enmity towards Assad and its allies, Russia and Iran. This also reduced its antagonism towards Iran at the regional level, beyond Syria.

The ideological and power-political confrontation between Turkey and Iran coexisted with functioning relations in other areas, most significantly the Kurds and the economy. It has been noted above that Turkey's closeness with the KRG caused tensions with the Iraqi government and its Iranian backers. But Iran also has its own Kurdish problem, and would not wish to see an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq.[69] Both countries want to avoid Kurdish secession and the consequent fragmentation of Iraq.[70] In the past, the Islamic Republic's occasional support for the PKK was resented by Turkey. The creation of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) by the PKK in 2004, and the periodic upsurge of tensions in the Kurdish areas of north-western Iran after 2011, brought Iran closer to Turkey and Tehran listed the PKK as a terrorist organization.[71] In Syria, the rise of the PKK-affiliated YPG displeased both Iran and Turkey and narrowed the gap between them. There may even be a convergence of Turkish and Iranian interests in Yemen and Libya.[72] Further reasons for mutual dependence and cooperation can be found in the area of

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[68] See also Ahmadian and Mohseni, 'Iran's Syria strategy'.

[69] Kumral Mehmet Akif, *Exploring emotions in Turkey–Iran relations: affective politics of partnership and rivalry* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 273–4, 282–3.

[70] Bayram Sinkaya, 'The Kurdish question in Iran and its effects on Iran–Turkey relations', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45: 5, 2018, pp. 840–59.

[71] Alberto Gasparetto, 'Iranian–Turkish relations in a changing Middle East', *International Studies* 18: 1, 2018, pp. 86–7, 91. Iran on occasion plays the PKK card against Turkey, or at least this is the latter's claim.

[72] Maysam Behravesh and Hamidreza Azisi, 'What's behind Iran's sudden realignment with Turkey?', *Responsible Statecraft*, 1 July 2020, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/07/01/whats-behind-irans-sudden-realignment-with-turkey/.

bilateral trade, with oil and gas imports from Iran to Turkey being of paramount importance for the latter, despite fluctuations.[73]

Some foreign policy ideologues in Turkey see Iran not as part of the Middle East but as part of Eurasia. Those who seek a pivot to Eurasia, which includes Russia and China, view Iran as a potential ally, because of its anti-western animus.[74] Eurasianist ideas have been circulating in Turkey since the 1990s, but the failed coup of 2016—in which Iran supported the AKP, heralding a spell of good relations[75]—provided a fresh impetus for them, as relations with the United States deteriorated. However, the fact remains that Eurasianism does not go beyond a vague idea of a strategic partnership with Russia, Iran and China in some political circles in Turkey;[76] and at the time of writing (April 2021), its political fortunes appear to have declined even further.[77] In the Caucasus, Iran has traditionally supported Armenia against Azerbaijan, and

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[73] Tamer Badawi, *The economic turn in Turkish–Iranian relations* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 March 2020), https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81273. The gold trade is also crucial and, as court cases in the United States revealed, underlay violation by Turkey of the sanctions against Iran. Strong economic links with Iran were behind Ankara's displeasure when the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear treaty of 2015 and imposed sanctions on Iran: Lenore G. Martin, 'Analysing a tumultuous relationship: Turkey and the US in the Middle East', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13: 2, 2019, p. 265.

[74] Göktürk Tüysüzoğlu, 'Strategic depth: a neo-Ottomanist interpretation of Turkish Eurasianism', *Mediterranean Quarterly* 25: 2, 2014, pp. 85–104; Özgur Tufekci, *The foreign policy of modern Turkey: power and the ideology of Eurasianism* (London: Tauris, 2017); Selçuk Colakoğlu, *The rise of Eurasianism in Turkish foreign policy: can Turkey change its pro-western orientation?* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 16 April 2019), https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation.

[75] Altunışık, 'Iran–Turkey relations', p. 141.

[76] Erşen, 'The return of Eurasianism in Turkey', pp. 32, 43.

[77] 'Admiral crackdown "could signal the end of Erdogan's Eurasianist shift": experts', *Arab News*, 7 April 2021, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1838631/middle-east.

the war of September–November 2020 placed Iran and Turkey on opposing sides.[78] The Eurasianist camp is not influential enough to push Turkey into a strongly pro-Iran position; and so the balancing act that has thus far characterized Iran–Turkey relations will continue for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

The article has argued that Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East is dominated by power-political and pragmatic considerations, particularly in its most recent, 'post-ideological' and transactional phase (roughly from 2015 onwards). My starting point was that the Middle East is not the mainstay of AKP foreign policy, and that there is no shift from 'West' to 'East' in Turkey's external relations—not because the AKP and Erdogan do not will it, but because they cannot achieve it, among other reasons because 'West' and 'East' do not actually exist. The AKP's and Erdogan's foreign policy in the Middle East may be permeated by ideological concerns and preferences; but the complexity—indeed, the very nature—of foreign policy does not allow it to be dictated by them. The different strands of ideology purveyed by the AKP (Islamism, neo-Ottomanism, civilizationalism) may catch the headlines, but they are routinely subjugated in practice to material and pragmatic preoccupations.

This was especially the case in the second half of the 2010s, when ideological objectives—having seen a brief upsurge owing to the opportunities presented by the 2011 Arab uprisings—were sidelined, for reasons both internal and external to Turkish politics. This trend could be observed, to varying degrees, in each of the four subregions into which this article has divided Turkish policy in the Middle East. In the neighbouring states of Syria and Iraq, the Kurdish problem and security concerns led to greater interventionism and, in the case of Syria, the abandonment of ideological pursuits, especially after the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's failure to assume the mantle of the anti-Assad opposition. In relations with the wider Arab world, declining Islamist political fortunes, and the increasingly fierce clash with Saudi Arabia and its allies, made Turkey put aside the promotion of its political model in favour of *realpolitik*. With Israel, ideological and ideational differences, mostly over Palestinian rights, were contained (though not overshadowed) by bonds of mutual economic and geopolitical interest. Finally, with

[78] Mohamed Ayoob, 'Turkey and Iran: frenemies in the Middle East', *Aspire Strategist*, 18 March 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/turkey-and-iran-frenemies-in-the-middle-east/.

Iran, the upsurge of ideological competition after 2011 turned into a political power rivalry, while relations were sustained in other areas because of common economic interests and mutual preoccupations over the Kurdish issue.

Turkish policy in the Middle East in the 2010s was actively determined by Ankara, but was equally a response to a changing regional order characterized by civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen; fierce regional rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran; Russian interventionism; and halting attempts by the United States to withdraw from the region. Deepening turmoil sucked Turkey into growing interventionism and resort to military power projection, even further marginalizing ideology. More changes will occur with the new US presidency of Joe Biden, which will have impacts on both the Middle Eastern regional order and, more directly, US–Turkish relations. Biden is critical of Turkish infractions abroad and authoritarianism at home;[79] but, on the other hand, his intention to return to the Iran nuclear treaty may offer a bridge to Turkey. In turn, there are signs—the current opening to Israel being one example[80]—that Ankara wants to placate the United States: more evidence that pragmatism continues to prevail in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East.

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[79] 'Joe Biden Türkiye hakkında ne dedi, AKP ve muhalefetten hangi tepkiler geldi?', BBC Türkçe, 15 Aug. 2020, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-53794105.

[80] Metin Gürcan, 'Shared interests in Iran, Caucasus push Turkey and Israel closer', *Al-Monitor*, 11 Dec. 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/12/turkey-israel-normalization-biden-victory-new-ambassador.html.