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Ankara's Middle East Policy Post Arab Spring

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IN 2002, TURKEY'S JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AKP) entered office and launched an ambitious plan to become a regional power. This effort was ultimately aided by phenomenal economic growth, which made Turkey the Middle East's largest economy. In its foreign policy, the AKP government pursued a "zero problems with neighbors" policy based on wielding soft power to gain influence.

This posture by the AKP marked a shift from the country's former approach to foreign affairs. Following the republican ethos of modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, its citizens—and especially its foreign policy elites—had come to think of themselves as part of a European nation placed accidentally next to the Middle East. Given this mindset, they preferred to stay away from the region and its complicated problems.

But if Atatürk saw Turkey as the Argentina of the Middle East, a country physically in the region but mentally in Europe, the AKP envisioned Turkey as the area's Brazil, a rising economic power with a burning desire to shape regional events. To this end, the new elites in Ankara pursued deep economic and political ties with the region's governments, including Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria.

Turkish Soft Power

The success of Turkey's exercise of soft power can be largely attributed to its burgeoning economy. Exemplifying this success, in 2010 Turkey became a majority middle-class society for the first time in its history, a fact the CIA recognized in September 2013 by listing the country as a developed economy.¹

Individual Turkish businesses exemplify the country's broader economic success. For example, THY, the

government-owned airline, flew from Istanbul to about seventy-five destinations in 2002. Today it services more than two hundred, many of them in the Middle East. In Iraq alone, the carrier now reaches six destinations, compared to zero in 2002.² This increased service has meant more Middle Eastern visitors in Turkey: whereas a decade ago only 7 percent of tourists in Turkey came from the Middle East, today over 12 percent do—totaling more than three million a year.

1. Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*: "Developed Countries," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/appendix/appendix-b.html#D>.

2. See "Flight Destinations," Turkish Airlines website: <http://www.turkishairlines.com/en-tr/flights-tickets/flights-destinations?departure=istanbul&continent=all&class=economy>.

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In becoming the region's strongest economy, Turkey has outpaced even energy behemoths Saudi Arabia and Iran. Much of Turkey's growth has come from a strong export sector. Turkish products—including everything from trucks to canned tomatoes—have found happy consumers across the Middle East, bringing Turkey clout in the same way that cars did for Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, to borrow a comparison from Washington Institute scholar Ambassador James Jeffrey. Turkish soap operas, once obscure dramas produced solely for local audiences, are now beamed into the living rooms of families from Aleppo to Zamalek. To name just one example, *Nur*, a classic rags-to-riches show, has enthralled more than 85 million viewers. In 2012, such soap operas earned Turkey about \$130 million from abroad, mostly from the Arab world.

For a time, Turkey's quest for influence, and its apparent success as an affluent, high-functioning Muslim-majority society, seemed to be having the effect desired by Ankara. In a 2011 Brookings Institution poll of the citizens of five Arab countries, Turkey was ranked first among countries believed to have played a "constructive role" in the Arab Spring.³ In the same survey, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's popularity towered above that of other world leaders.

. . . and Its Limits

Despite Turkey's achievements, recent developments—including the Syrian civil war and Iran's hegemonic designs—have stunted its regional ambitions. In particular, Turkey's backing for the rebels in the Syrian conflict has pitted Ankara against the pro-Assad Iranians in a proxy war—the first time Turkey and Iran have been in such an adversarial position since the seventeenth century, when the Ottomans and Persians concluded a 166-year war for regional influence. Further, both Ankara's support for the Sunni opposition to Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and its rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds—steps seen by Baghdad as an affront to its sovereignty—have soured Iraq's perceptions of Turkey, just as Turkish views of Maliki as a pro-Iranian leader have soured Ankara's perceptions of Iraq. Beyond the country's immediate neighbors, and more recently, Turkish relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and

other Arab monarchies have been hurt due to Ankara's support for the Muslim Brotherhood's party in Egypt.

These discouraging trends, along with the threat of chemical weapons proliferation and al-Qaeda-controlled enclaves next door in Syria, have forced Turkey to acknowledge that its soft power cannot be readily transferred into hard power. A growing sense of isolation from its Muslim neighbors has also prompted Ankara to pivot in its foreign policy, over the last two years, toward the United States. Within the region, perhaps surprising allies and partners have emerged in the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, Muslim Brotherhood-style parties, and potentially the Cypriots as well as the Israelis. Ankara seems to have other policy trajectories as well, and has reached out to Iran and Iraq to contain the war in Syria.

Indeed, the very legitimacy of Turkey's doctrine of soft power seems to be increasingly open to doubt. When Erdogan and the AKP came to power in 2002, the conventional wisdom in Ankara was that Turkey should stop looking to Europe, which had continually snubbed it, and instead focus on regaining the regional leadership role it had lost with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. That, the AKP maintained, would best be accomplished not through displays of military force but rather by building up soft power.

In facilitating stronger diplomatic ties with its Muslim neighbors, Turkish officials routinely made high-level visits to Baghdad, Damascus, Tehran, and other regional capitals. Between November 2002 and April 2009, for instance, the Turkish foreign minister visited Iran and Syria eight times in total. In addition, Turkey opened scores of new embassies and consulates across the Arab world, giving the country a visibility in the region that it had lacked since the Ottoman era, after which the Arabs fell principally under British and French rule.

At the same time, Turkey made a point of standing apart from the United States to solidify its position as a legitimate regional player. For example, in 2005, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a secularist and then Turkey's president, visited Damascus over Washington's explicit objections.⁴ That bid for warmer ties with Syria seemed to work. After the meeting, Turkey lifted visa restrictions for Syrians⁵ and the two countries began to hold joint cabinet

3. Shibley Telhami, "The 2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll," Brookings Institution, November 21, 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2011/11/21-arab-public-opinion-telhami>.

4. "Turkey Defies U.S. with Syria Visit," BBC News, April 13, 2015, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4440183.stm.

5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, "Relations

meetings.⁶ The new tone gave Turkey ample influence over its smaller southern neighbor, which it hoped to peel away from Iran.

Flaunting its perceived influence in Syria and beyond, Ankara even dangled the idea of a “Shamgen zone,”⁷ a play on the European Union’s Schengen free travel area and Sham, the traditional name for Syria in Arabic. The idea was that Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon would come together under a customs and political union.

But when, in 2011, open rebellion broke out against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, Ankara’s soft power met its limits. Initially, Turkish leaders encouraged Assad to enact reforms, expecting him to heed their words. In August 2011, Turkey’s foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, spent six hours pleading with the Syrian leader to stop killing civilians, hoping that Turkey’s good ties with the regime would be enough to propel a change in its behavior. Assad not only disregarded Davutoglu, but within hours of the Turkish official’s departure from Damascus, he sent tanks into Hama, a center of the rebellion. Ankara later severed all diplomatic ties with Assad.⁸

Unlike Turkey, Iran has cultivated significant hard power in the region and has used it to arm the Assad regime, sending advisors and fighters to support him and mobilizing its regional proxies, including Hezbollah, to help crush the Syrian uprising.⁹

To counter Iran, Ankara has attempted some hard-power maneuvering of its own. Turkey officially backs the rebels in northern Syria, providing them with safe haven on its territory and standing by as they pass weapons into Syria from the Turkish side of the border.¹⁰ But

because it lacks strong proxies, and with no credible promise of U.S. action to oust the Assad regime, Ankara cannot counterbalance Tehran on its own in Syria. Even when the immediate crisis ends, Turkey will remain at a disadvantage, facing dual threats in Syria: an Iran-backed hostile rump state at its doorstep, which will not forget Ankara’s support to its rebels, and al-Qaeda-controlled enclaves. Whichever way Syria goes, unfavorable outcomes for Turkey seem more likely than favorable ones.

At the same time, Turkey’s ties with its other Arab neighbor, Iraq, have unraveled, with Turkish competition with Iran once again playing a central role. Ankara, for its part, sees Prime Minister Maliki as an Iranian pawn and has, as noted, supported the Iraqi opposition.¹¹ In return, Maliki has lambasted Ankara’s Syria policy while also taking issue with Ankara’s close ties with the Iraqi Kurds. More devastating, Maliki has blocked Turkey from using his country as a trade route in an attempt to cut it off from the region at large. This move has been made all the more effective by Turkey’s loss of its other land route to the Middle East, which ran through Syria.

Between Iran and the United States

The change in orientation initiated by the AKP in 2002 required that it take a different approach to both Iran and the United States. Among Turkish elites, the feeling at the time was that Ankara had played second fiddle to Washington for too long in the Middle East. Turkey could become a regional power only by dissenting with U.S. policy when and if needed. Accordingly, Turkish resistance to U.S. plans in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war bestowed legitimacy on the new regime in the eyes of the region’s peoples. Similarly, Turkish aims to exert regional soft power—using cultural, social, and economic influence, as well as diplomacy—were behind the 2010 effort to enlist Brazil to help forge a nuclear deal with Iran. Here, Turkey saw an opportunity to play a prominent role on the world stage, to be helpful on an issue on which Europe and the United States had failed to advance. By involving Brazil, Turkey was saying, “We new powers can solve problems you old ones cannot.” But the approach backfired for the Turks. And when

between Turkey–Syria,” <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey%E2%80%93syria.en.mfa>.

6. Ibid.

7. “Samgen Vizesinde Anlasmaya Varildi!” *Milliyet*, March 8, 2011, <http://tatil.milliyet.com.tr/samgen-vizesinde-anlasmaya-varildi/-inttur/haberdetay/07.03.2011/1361069/default.htm>.

8. “Turkish PM Cuts All Ties with Syria,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=turkish-pm-cuts-all-ties-with-syria-2011-09-21>.

9. Michael R. Gordon, “Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html?pagewanted=all>.

10. Martin Chulov, “Syrian Rebels Claim Receipt of Major Weapons Shipment,” *Guardian*, August 25, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/25/syrian-rebels-weapons-shipment>.

11. Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans, *Turkey’s Changing Relations with Iraq: Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down*, Policy Focus 122, Washington Institute, October 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-changing-relations-with-iraq-kurdistan-up-baghdad-down>.

the deal fell apart, a debate emerged in Washington over whether the Americans were “losing” Turkey.¹²

Having squandered valuable diplomatic capital with Washington over the Iran issue, Turkey also found that Iran was not reciprocating its gestures of friendship. In this regard, the war in Syria has been a case in point. In late 2011, hoping to help oust the Assad regime, Turkey began to host and arm members of the Syrian opposition. But, thus far, this policy has not borne the desired results. For whatever gains the rebels have made, Assad and his supporters—thanks to Iran’s assistance—appear likely to hold on to parts of Syria. Accordingly, instead of a speedy collapse of the Assad regime, Turkey now faces the prospect of a weak and divided state next door.

Thus, in facing its most complex security challenge since the Cold War, Ankara has once again turned to the United States, apparently seeing Washington as an indispensable ally in addressing Iran’s regional influence and shielding itself from the instability simmering next door in Syria. The ambit of grim scenarios emerging from the Syrian war ranges from the proliferation of chemical weapons to state collapse across from Turkey’s longest border.

In Iraq, too, Iran is Turkey’s main competitor. In the 2010 Iraqi election, Ankara backed the secular, pan-Iraqi bloc headed by Ayad Allawi. But Allawi lost to Maliki, whom Ankara considers “Iran’s man in Baghdad,”¹³ creating a fissure between Ankara and both Baghdad and Tehran. In return, Ankara has built intimate ties with communities in Iraq’s Sunni north, bringing into its fold Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmens to counter Maliki and Tehran’s influence. In today’s Iraq, the widespread perception is that Turkey and Iraq’s Sunnis are facing off against Iran and Iraq’s Shiites.

By this logic, Turkey (as well as Qatar and Saudi Arabia) is backing Sunni rebels in the fight against a coalition of Iran-supported Shiite forces in Syria. Those latter forces comprise Iranians, Iraqi and Lebanese Shiites, and, last but not least, the country’s Alawite minority. The alignment of revolutionary Iran with Syrian Alawites has been forming since the 1970s, as evidenced by fatwas issued by ayatollahs Hassan Mahdi al-Shirazi and Musa al-Sadr arguing that Alawites are members of the Shiite sect.

In a way, Turkey’s struggles in the Middle East mirror those of Japan in East Asia. Even today, Japan, the consummate soft-power nation, relies on U.S. hard power for its security in East Asia. Japan needs U.S. bases, the nuclear umbrella, and treaties to guard itself against China and nuclear North Korea. Similarly, Turkey needs the United States to protect it against the challenges posed by the Syrian civil war. Moreover, Ankara needs U.S. hard power against Iran. In turn, Turkey’s pivot back toward Washington has led it to temper its bullish tone on Iran: until the Syrian war started, Ankara would often rise to defend Tehran’s right to pursue nuclear energy research for peaceful use.¹⁴ Recently, though, Turkey has gone silent on Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Privately, Turkish leaders point to Tehran as their greatest rival.

Muslim Brotherhood Policy

After 2002, Turkey’s Middle East focus brought the country close not only to regional governments but also to various Muslim Brotherhood-style parties, with these latter relationships likely to be comparatively longer-lasting. Once shunned by Westerners as a hardline Islamist party, the AKP sees itself as a model, moving forward, for the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

MB parties in places like Egypt and Syria, according to the AKP’s logic, could moderate and come to power through democratic elections. For Turkey, such an outcome would have the added benefit of creating natural regional allies. With the MB’s initial rise to power in Egypt, Turkey’s vision seemed to be coming to fruition. Likewise, in Syria, Ankara began supporting the MB to help it emerge as the leader of the country’s opposition.¹⁵

12. For various arguments on this issue, see Soner Cagaptay, “Does Turkey’s Iran Policy serve Turkey?” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=does-turkey8217s-iran-policy-serve-turkey-2010-05-31>; Steven Cook, “How Do You Say ‘Frenemy’ in Turkish?” *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/01/how_do_you_say_frenemy_in_Turkish; Morton Abramowitz and Henri Barkey, “Turkey’s Political Revolution,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704207504575129313434669400.html>.

13. Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evans, *Turkey’s Changing Relations with Iraq: Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down*, Policy Focus 122, Washington Institute, October 2012, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-changing-relations-with-iraq-kurdistan-up-baghdad-down>.

14. “Erdogan Says Iran’s Nuclear Program Is Humanitarian,” Anadolu Agency, October 27, 2009, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/37945--erdogan-says-iran-s-nuclear-program-is-humanitarian>.

15. Bayram Balci, “Turkey’s Relations with the Syrian Opposition,”

Similar strategies were pursued in Tunisia and Libya, although with mixed results for Turkish power and reach across North Africa.

As Washington Institute scholar David Pollock writes, Libya under Muammar Qadhafi was long an important outpost for Turkish economic interests, especially in the vast infrastructure and construction projects favored by the former dictator. As of early 2011, when Libya was convulsed by an Arab Spring uprising, Turkey engaged in around \$2.5 billion in annual trade with Libya. This was not a huge sum, but it was augmented by some \$15 billion in contracts, half of which were in construction supported by 25,000 Turkish workers.

In part as a result of this legacy, the Turks hesitated to embrace the mid-2011 NATO military intervention that quickly helped topple Qadhafi. Afterward, too, when Turkey did reach out to the new regime in Tripoli, Ankara was viewed as favoring Muslim Brotherhood affiliates—who ended up doing surprisingly poorly in Libya's first-ever democratic election.

Nevertheless, Turkey has continued assiduously to cultivate new Libyan business and political ties, recouping at least some of its former position in both fields. For example, Foreign Minister Davutoglu was among the very first leaders to arrive in Tripoli after the rebels captured it in August 2011. Two years later, Turkey was right back in the business of equipping the Libyan armed forces and national police. In this respect, Turkey has done a better job of restoring its influence in the country than, say, China, which lost an even larger economic stake there during the revolution and has yet to regain it.

Again as pointed out by David Pollock, Tunisia was the one Arab country whose recent political trajectory seemed most to follow Turkey's model. This could be observed in the sense of an avowedly moderate Islamist party, Ennahda (Renaissance), winning the lead role in government in free electoral competition. Moreover, competitors included a variety of well-established secular parties within a society split almost evenly between Islamists and conservatives, on one hand, and secular elements, on the other. Ennahda's leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, was among a very few Arab politicians to openly espouse the so-called Turkish model. In this case, mainly

political rather than economic interests drove Turkey to seek close ties with the new regime in Tunis, including through several visits by Prime Minister Erdogan.

The eventual problem, however, was Ennahda's steady loss of popularity inside Tunisia. The party proved unable to provide either security or economic progress, even as it aroused suspicion of covert ties to much more extreme and even violent fundamentalist groups like Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law). A belated Ennahda move to disavow such support failed to calm either the street or the elites in Tunisia, and Ennahda finally announced its resignation in late September 2013. So, to the extent that Turkey's fortunes or even its image in North Africa was tied to this kindred ruling party, Ankara's pro-Muslim Brotherhood orientation had suffered a significant symbolic setback.

On the Palestinian scene, Turkey has thrown its lot behind Hamas, hoping to use its newfound regional influence to convince the radical Palestinian group to moderate.¹⁶ In this regard, the policymakers in Ankara also hoped Hamas would recognize Israel and renounce violence, thereby moving closer to the likes of MB-style parties leading in post-2011 Egypt and Tunisia. The radical Palestinian group, however, has not heeded Turkey's counsel. Even after losing its Syrian bases during the fighting, and appearing more isolated than ever, Hamas did not fall under Turkish influence. And while Turkey's Hamas policy has yet to deliver results, the policy also poses a challenge to the traditionally good ties between Ankara and the Palestinian Authority and will place stress on Turkish-Israeli ties, when and if they are restored.

More recent events have further upended Ankara's vision of gaining power in the Middle East through the MB. Following the Brotherhood's ouster in Egypt, Turkish ties with the country have come almost undone, with the new leadership—taking issue with Ankara's strongly pro-MB stance—pulling the Egyptian ambassador from Ankara. Turkish businesses have suffered in Egypt since, undermining Turkey's cherished soft-power goals.

Turkey's pro-MB stance in Egypt has also cost Ankara favor with the Saudis and other like-minded

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 13, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/13/turkey-s-relations-with-syrian-opposition/a88u#>.

16. Elliott Abrams, "Turkey and Hamas," *Pressure Points* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, January 27, 2012, <http://blogs.cfr.org/abrams/2012/01/27/turkey-and-hamas/>.

Arab monarchies¹⁷ and will continue to do so. At the same time, in Syria, Turkish-backed MB factions have been losing to the radical Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) on the battlefield and are being supplanted by the Saudi-backed forces in the political opposition.¹⁸ These developments leave Hamas (in charge of the Gaza Strip) as the remnant of Turkey's "ascendant Muslim Brotherhood" policy in the Middle East.

Enter the Kurds

The uncertain fate of Muslim Brotherhood parties across the region, along with the similarly uncertain outcome of Turkey's Syria policy, helps explain Ankara's recent pivot toward the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, as well as inside Turkey.

Even before the Arab Spring started, Turkey had built good ties with the Iraqi Kurds, who saw Ankara as a necessary ally to keep their autonomy vis-à-vis the central government in Baghdad. Amid Syria's turmoil, the Kurds there have acted to spin away from central government control, following the Iraqi Kurdish model. Both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds consider Turkey a key ally against the forces of Arab nationalism. Turkey, for its own part, sees the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq and Syria across from its border as a cordon sanitaire that will shield it from long-running civil war and sectarian strife in both countries.¹⁹

Turkey's rapprochement with its own Kurds completes this puzzle. Ankara has recently launched peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a terrorist group against which it had hitherto fought.²⁰ The PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), control many Kurdish-majority towns in northern Syria and are integral to Turkey's likely plans to establish a buffer zone in Syria, explaining Ankara's shift on the groups.

Ankara's rapprochement with the PKK also has a domestic angle: Turkish prime minister Erdogan wants to be elected as the country's next president in the summer 2014 elections. For Erdogan to maintain his vote-getting strongman image, the PKK must be kept quiet. In return, the Ankara government has promised amnesty to PKK members and an upgrade to house arrest for the organization's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, who is currently serving a life sentence in an isolated island jail.²¹

Given Turkey's new regional alliance with the Kurds, analysts suggest that, faced with a power vacuum in northern Syria, Turkey could side with the PYD/PKK against JN/al-Qaeda. This claim is supported with recent press reports that Ankara has started to act against weapons flows to JN, PKK's chief rival in Kurdish areas of Syria.²²

Eastern Mediterranean Affairs

The unusual realignments in the new Middle East, such as that casting Turkey and the PKK as potential allies, could also include a renewed alliance between Turkey and Israel, should continuing talks aimed at political normalization succeed. Following the Russia-backed chemical weapons deal in Syria, which provides Assad with a potential lifeline, Ankara feels even more exposed to the fallout from the Syrian war. Israel, too, shares Turkey's dual threat perception in Syria—namely, that from an Iran-backed rump state surrounded by al-Qaeda enclaves. Cooperation against instability in Syria could well pave the way for future Turkish-Israeli ties.

Following normalization, the two countries could also agree on a shared vision for exploiting Israel's natural gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean. The Israelis are interested in exploring a pipeline that runs under the Mediterranean Sea to Turkey; from there, the gas could be conveniently sold to the Turkish market or pumped into the Turkish gas grid, which connects to European markets. Ankara, for its part, seems interested in such an energy deal, which serves Turkey's desire to become

17. Soner Cagaptay and Parag Khanna, "Middle East Reconfigured: Turkey vs. Iran vs. Saudi Arabia," CNN, September 13, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/13/opinion/khanna-cagaptay-turkey-iran-saudi-arabia/index.html>.

18. Mona Mahmood and Ian Black, "Free Syrian Army Rebels Defect to Islamist Group Jabhat al-Nusra," *Guardian*, May 8, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/08/free-syrian-army-rebels-defect-islamist-group>.

19. Soner Cagaptay, "Turkey's Foray into the Fertile Crescent," *New York Times*, February 27, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/opinion/global/turkeys-foray-into-syrias-fertile-crescent.html?_r=0.

20. Umut Uras, "Turkey Continues Peace Talks with the PKK," *Aljazeera*, January 10, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/2013110153318352861.html>.

21. "Ocalan House Arrest Can Be Discussed if PKK Lays Down Arms," Turkish Deputy PM Says," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 15, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nid=23272>.

22. "Kiliste Sinir Kapilari Karsilikli Kapatildi," *Milliyet*, September 20, 2013, <http://dunya.milliyet.com.tr/kilis-te-sinir-kapilari-karsilikli/dunya/detay/1766048/default.htm>.

a regional power.²³ What is more, while Turkey now depends on Russia and Iran for nearly three quarters of its energy imports, Israeli gas would help Ankara diversify, moving away from Russia and Iran. Cooperation on eastern Mediterranean gas, a tall order, could include Greek and Turkish Cypriots—Cyprus has its own gas deposits—linking Turkey, Israel, and Cyprus in the same way the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline permanently linked Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey in the 1990s. In recognition of this opportunity, the U.S. Department of State has recently created a new office grouping Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus under a deputy assistant secretary responsible for eastern Mediterranean affairs.

A third area for cooperation in the new Turkish-Israeli relationship is trade. Since losing its overland trade routes to the Middle East through Iraq and Syria, Turkey has successfully reached out to Israel to establish an overseas line from the Turkish ports of Mersin and Iskenderun to the Israeli port of Haifa.²⁴ Indeed, despite the downturn in political ties, Turkish-Israeli trade has remained solid in recent years, growing from \$3.38 billion in 2008 to \$4.03 billion in 2012²⁵ and signaling a bedrock for the countries' future relationship.

Conclusion

Thanks to Turkey's meteoric economic rise over the past decade, the AKP's goal of wielding soft power throughout the Middle East has been, for the most part, fulfilled.

23. Hugh Pope, "Israel's Plan to Bring Cyprus and Turkey Together," International Crisis Group, September 19, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/op-eds/pope-israel-plan-to-bring-cyprus-and-turkey-together.aspx>.
24. John Reed, "Israel Promotes Trade Route between Turkey and Middle East," *Financial Times*, August 27, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/11183018-0f22-11e3-ae66-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=intl#axzz2g0k4898d>.
25. Turkish Statistical Institute, "Exports by Countries, Imports by Countries," http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1046.

Turkey today is the Middle East's dominant economy, surpassing runners-up Iran and Saudi Arabia by a wide margin. Turkish businesses are rising in the Middle East, and Turkish cultural products, from television programs to schools, are likewise in demand. Turkey has also managed to build soft power in other respects. For example, its Gulen movement has exported Turkish culture worldwide. Similarly, the Turkish Foreign Ministry has vastly expanded its diplomatic representation, and Ankara has joined numerous regional and international forums.

But Turkey's plan to be a standalone power in the region is nowhere near fruition. Turkey realizes that its soft power is not readily transferable into hard power, and this realization has prompted Ankara's foreign policy to pivot over the past two years. Since 2011, Ankara has moved closer to the United States, looking for shelter once again under the NATO umbrella. The war in Syria and rivalry with Iran have reminded Turkey of the importance of having a strong partner for defensive purposes. Turkey resembles Japan in this respect: both countries have large economies and exert soft power, yet they cannot do without a robust external security framework. This fact, coupled with a long history of Westernization, shows why Turkey cannot simply tear off its ties with the United States like a Band-Aid.

The political landscape of the new Middle East has upended many of Turkey's regional ambitions. Today, Ankara has shaky ties with its neighbors Iran and Iraq, and faces long-term and critical instability emanating from Syria. This is why Turkey has reached out to Baghdad and Tehran in recent days. Finally, Turkey confronts the challenge of restoring its ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab monarchies. These dynamics leave Ankara with the Kurds and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the Cypriots and Israelis, as its potential regional partners and allies. From here on, the choices will be, of course, up to Turkey.