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The US and Turkey in the fog of Regional Uncertainty

Kostas Ifantis

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ABSTRACT

Security relations with the US have been critical for Turkey. Cold War strategic imperatives dictated typical bandwagoning policies, although disagreements and frictions were present at times. In the 2000s a combination of domestic developments and rapidly changing regional security patterns have resulted in a more assertive Turkish regional security policy, which for many represents a departure from traditional Kemalist principles. This paper attempts to assess the current course of Turkish regional security engagement and the extent to which relations between the USA and Turkey are subject to major change. The analytical context accounts for the impact of domestic, regional and global levels. The empirical focus is on Turkey's involvement in the Syrian sectarian conflict and on the trajectory of the bilateral relations with Israel.

Keywords: US-Turkish relations, Israel, Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, regional security

[#] Kostas Ifantis is currently a Visiting Professor at Kadir Has University in Istanbul. He is, also, an Associate Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Athens. He worked as a Lecturer in International and European Politics at the Universities of Bradford and Portsmouth, UK (1991-1995). He was USIS Visiting Fellow at the Center for Political studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1998), Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (2002) and IAA Senior Research Fellow at the Hellenic Observatory of the LSE (2009). His papers have appeared in edited books and in periodicals such as *Democratization*, *International Journal*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *Review of International Affairs*, *Turkish Studies*, etc.

Correspondence: kifantis@pspa.uoa.gr and konstantinos.ifantis@khas.edu.tr

The US and Turkey in the fog of Regional Uncertainty

1. Introduction

Long gone the days when US-Turkish relations have been subject to Cold War pressures. On the US side, Turkey is no longer a Cold War outpost to be held secure at all cost and with every means. Although both are NATO allies and bilateral cooperation is valued, the relationship has been subject to changing domestic auditoria, changing regional aspirations as well as regional and global power reconfigurations. It looks like both have become more realistic about the strengths and limits of their relationship, and the demands they make upon each other have become less straightforward.

Turkey is changing and it is changing fast with the Kemalist secular tradition being challenged as the dominant identity source. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been successful in the struggle for power against the old secularist guard. In foreign policy, Turkey has adopted a much more Ankara-centric approach to the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, embodied in the ideologically driven “Davutoglu doctrine”, while the US under Obama has been attempting to focus its strategic gaze in East Asia exhibiting a reduced appetite for a more direct involvement in the Middle East. Both have been rather unprepared for the changes suddenly unfolding in the region. The main argument in this paper is that in a rather unchartered regional security setting, the variety of actors, roles, and perceived interests have resulted

in considerable degrees of security anxiety and policies often without basic direction, coherence and well assessed goals. One very fundamental question - albeit hard to answer at this juncture – is whether Turkey under AKP would increasingly find itself at odds with the West should it continue to pursue a “neo-Ottoman” course.¹

The following discussion attempts to assess the course of security relations between the USA and Turkey against a highly uncertain Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern subsystem. The focus is firstly on the current reading of US foreign policy priorities and preferences, its reluctant focus on Eastern Mediterranean, and its uncertain engagement in the wider Middle East. Secondly, Turkey’s changing regional security setting and the domestic anxieties and pressures, which are present at the effort of the AKP government to revise its regional stance in a rather radical manner is discussed. Special attention is given to the deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations and to Turkish policy in Syria and the extent to which they do impact upon regional security dynamics and dilemmas.

2. Washington’s shifting focus under Barack Obama

In 2008, the Economist declared that the Bush foreign policy doctrine will not last in its present form, but nor will it disappear altogether.² Five years later, the reality is that, despite domestic challenges and limited resources, President Obama has succeeded in generating some change. A much stronger focus on strengthening international institutions and

¹ Many believe that the AKP leadership seeks to reverse the secular legacy of Mustafa Kemal by eliminating restrictions on Islam and undercutting “the old judicial and military order that guarded against the Islamization of Turkey” (Fradkin and Libby 2013).

² ‘Can the Bush doctrine last?’, *The Economist*, March 29th-April 4th 2008.

galvanizing collective action³ has meant that the President's apparent conviction that universal values and practical geopolitics exist in the same tension as war and peace amounts to a belief-system situated within an "amalgam of pragmatism and Niebuhrian realism" (Milne 2012: 939). In practice, Obama tried to undo at least some of the damage inflicted to US foreign policy by the Bush Administration and more or less he "has handled the terrain deftly"⁴. An enormous challenge, especially when one must try to balance the interests between adversaries and allies, deal with a very hostile Republican Congress and need to manage the global recession both at home and abroad.

From 2001, the US went through a decade of massive foreign commitments and interventions, which proved enormously expensive in blood and treasure as well as highly unpopular around the world. This overextension was followed by a financial crisis that drained American power. The result was a foreign policy that was insolvent. Obama assumed power determined to pare down excess commitments, regain goodwill and refocus the US on core missions to achieve a more stable and sustainable global position. He came into office with a set of beliefs about the world that he has tried to act upon. He believed Iraq was an expensive mistake and a major distraction and he drew down US forces from 142,000 in early 2009 to zero by the end of 2011. In Afghanistan, he sought to end the more expensive aspects of the mission, focusing the fight on counterterrorism, which he embraced with ferocity, in Pakistan, Yemen as well as Afghanistan; and this against a doctrinal shift

³ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 27 May 2010.

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, 'The Strategist', *Time*, January 30, 2012, p. 16.

that allowed for a rediscovery of multilateralism and a kind of leadership aware of the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil as well as of the limits in terms of US resources and influence. By understanding the dynamics of globalization and interdependence and how far they are responsible for shaping the evolution of the international system - where the limitations of US power politics have been acknowledged - Obama chose the strategic significance of cooperative efforts with both allies and non-allies to combat transnational threats. Bruce Jones (2009: 69) has illustrated this policy as an example of 'cooperative realism'.

By the time of his reelection in November 2012, Obama's military policies and rhetoric had amounted to a doctrine and represented a major shift in that "Europe is no longer the key region shaping American grand strategy" (Stepak and Whitlark 2012: 47). Nor does the Middle East rank high in the US foreign policy agenda (Gerger 2013: 300). Instead, the focus has been increasingly on the Asia-Pacific region. This emphasis is reflected in the Defense Department's January 2012 "strategic guidance" document, which states that, "US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia".⁵ The White House has been trying to pivot the US strategic gaze from Europe (and the Middle East) to China and Asia, in an effort for the US to become the central power broker in China's external relations in Asia (Niblett 2012: 1). Indeed, Obama's big first-term goal was to close the military accounts in the Muslim world so that the US could refocus its attention on the Asia-Pacific region. The US

⁵ 'Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense', http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

troop presence in Afghanistan concludes in 2014. But the scaling down there and in Iraq has already freed up resources to go east. Leon Panetta said the US would deploy 60 per cent of its naval assets in the Asia-Pacific and 40 per cent in the Atlantic – from the previous 50:50 division.⁶ It is a vivid acknowledgement of the reality that Europe is no longer topping the agenda, that the US resources are finite, and an appreciation that the international environment is far from straightforward as some vocal ideologues in US (and elsewhere) would have it appear (Milne 2012: 935).

The realization that America's priorities have been shifting, was further underscored on 8 November 2012 – only a day after the reelection of Obama – when the White House announced that the President's first overseas trip would be to Southeast Asia.⁷ A few years ago it would have been hard to imagine a freshly elected president heading straight for southeast Asia – and in the midst of negotiations to avert a fiscal cliff. Yet, Obama's first itinerary comprised three of China's neighbours (Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand), for the larger game is and will always be for some time about China.

If Obama is successful, US' 'rebalancing' to Asia will be his chief diplomatic legacy in 2016. If the Middle East is true to form, however, he will be continually wrenched back into the ancient regional quagmires. As we are reminded by the Syrian imbroglio, "the tug of war between

⁶ According to the Pentagon, this will include one aircraft carrier, four standard destroyers, three Zumwalt destroyers, ten Littoral combat ships and two submarines – as well as the new base in Darwin, Australia that will host 2,500 marines. Edward Luce, 'Obama's road to Xanadu runs through Jerusalem', *Financial Times*, 19 November 2012.

⁷ Melissa Eddy, 'Germans feeling ignored by Obama', *International Herald Tribune*, 10-11 November 2012.

Middle East realities and the unfolding strategy in the Pacific is likely to be the chief tension through Obama's second term".⁸ Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean are not realities that Washington can afford to ignore, for they always return with a vengeance.

3. The realities of regional fog

Eastern Mediterranean has been a meeting point of strategic dynamics, which involve state as well as sub-state actors and strategic realignments caused by several countries' security search, with Turkey being a case in point. The US has been casting a wide political and security shadow in the region since the end of the Second World War. The cornerstone of the US Middle Eastern strategy has for some time been the two major regional triangular relationships: US-Turkey-Israel and US-Egypt-Israel (Alterman and Malka 2012: 111). This arrangement has traditionally enhanced the US interests such as maintaining a stable regional balance of power, securing the energy supply of the West and ameliorating Israel's security dilemma through boosting its ties to major littoral powers. Thus the US was allowed more freedom in partly shaping and controlling the development of the regional order and providing the foundation for regional stability (ibid. 2012: 114). In the case of Turkish-Israeli relations, they took a strategic turn with the signing of a military cooperation agreement in 1996⁹ and were considered as an essential element of the Turkish-US strategic bond. It highlighted Turkey's importance in the Middle East as Israel's partner, while as a side

⁸ Luce, 'Obama's road to Xanadu'.

⁹ The agreement allowed, among other, the Israeli Air Force to use Turkish airspace for training, thus providing Israel with much needed strategic depth. By 2001, the US military was participating in trilateral air force and search-and-rescue exercises with Israel and Turkey.

payment it generated strong support from the powerful Jewish lobby in Washington on issues that were important to Turkey, such as countering the influence of the Armenian lobby and supporting Turkey's demands for advanced military hardware in the US Congress (Aydin 2009: 134-135). In the case of the Egyptian-Israeli partnership, common interests included countering Iranian activism, combating terrorism and religious extremism and maintaining some form of stability by balancing out any threatening behaviours.

Since the late 2000s, however, the strategic geography the US helped to shape has been crumbling (Alterman and Malka 2012: 111) with the advent to power in Turkey, Egypt and elsewhere of political forces that do not seem to share the same agenda as their predecessors. Established assumptions and relationships have been challenged, and not as a product of US preferences. After nearly two decades of relative predictability, the two-triangles-setting has been wearing off and since the 'Arab Spring' revolutions a new Middle East is colliding with the old order. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has long defined the region exploded in another spasm of violence, with the November 2012 Gaza Strip eruption. Although, the crisis looked like a rerun of past turmoil, this time, the context has been different. Traditional actors had new calculations, and each tested the limits of the order in the wake of 'Arab Spring' regime changes.¹⁰

¹⁰ The eight-day conflict between Hamas and Israel ended in a cease-fire. The repercussions for Israel and Arab leaders have been major. Israel, despite its superior military and technological advantage as well as its modern Iron Dome system, was unable to intercept all the longer-range Fajr-5 rockets fired from Gaza that reached Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The 'invisibility' of Israel has been in doubt and has also emboldened other groups towards Israel - most notably Hezbollah. The crisis has also been a political setback for Arab leaders who have remained silent and the Palestinian Authority. On the other hand, Hamas has gained

The AKP government in Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt have been openly quite critical of the pre-existing arrangements. They have openly sought greater distance from Israel and adopted increasingly independent positions vis-à-vis and beyond the reach and influence of the US. The demise of ancient regional strategic regime is seen widely as having rather negative implications for the US strategy and for Israeli security.¹¹ In Ankara and in Cairo, the new governing elites have already been seeking to rebalance their relationships with Israel by lessening economic ties and unraveling existing security arrangements.¹² Without doubt, Israel's neighborhood has become more hostile. One player it could count on to contain Hamas, Egypt has a new Islamist regime.¹³ In Lebanon, the Hezbollah party-cum-militia holds sway. Jordan's King Abdullah is under increasing political and economic pressure. Syria is in the throes of a war that has shattered the calm on the border with Israel and whose outcome will be critical to the regional status quo.¹⁴ Moreover, such developments come at a time when the US grave economic situation undermines Washington's ability to pursue effective strategies and to shape

popularity among Palestinians and Muslims for not succumbing to yet another Israeli bombardment. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, 'Iran and Hamas Winners in Gaza Conflict', 26 November 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/gazawarregionaleffects.html>.

¹¹ Since the December 2008-January 2009 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, Turkey excluded the Israeli Air Force from the annual Anatolian Eagle air exercise. In response to the Turkish decision, the US cancelled its participation (Alterman and Malka 2012: 119).

¹² While the Egyptian government have suggested they would not abandon the Camp David Accords, they have signaled its belief that Israel has not fulfilled its obligations and a thorough renegotiation is necessary. The announcement by the Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation in April 2012 that it would cease selling natural gas to Israel is a modest example of the deterioration of Egyptian-Israeli strategic cooperation (Alterman and Malka 2012: 120-121).

¹³ In the November 2012 crisis, Hamas negotiated the cease-fire with Israel through the agency of Cairo. This may represent an important step toward Hamas becoming a more recognized player. 'Hamas chief makes first visit to Gaza Strip', *International Herald Tribune*, 8-9 December 2012.

¹⁴ 'Old battles, new Middle East', *The Economist*, November 24, 2012.

outcomes and set agendas in a region that is going through the most unsettling reshuffling since the early years of the Cold war. The 'Arab Spring' process of regime change and the advent to power of less secular political forces has been unexpected and hence more troubling for external actors.

In general, however, the Obama Administration demonstrated caution and its approach has remained constant to date. Each revolution has been met with trepidation – for shifts in power in the Arab world can be unsettling as they are easily transformed into the settling of scores, political vendettas and undue reprisals – followed by rhetorical support and by deliberation on the best way to facilitate regime change without committing US resources. At the end of the day, Washington's response has been defined on a case-by-case basis without the traditional ideological inclinations or instinctual reactions contaminating the decision-making process (Milne 2012: 941-2). It is unclear, though, what tools the United States has to affect the course of the 'Arab Spring' in the medium run. Where, more action is needed absence is offered. The US (and Europe) seems lacking the will and the power to intervene in the much more strategically important Syrian imbroglio. For now, at least, the key event in the Middle East for a generation is largely beyond the US' influence (Miller 2012: 17). Overall, American influence in the Arab world has seriously waned. The new regimes in the Middle East are and will most probably remain cool to Washington because of religious pressures; because the Middle East peace process is stalled if not dead; and because elections are producing populists who court their publics by thumbing their noses at Washington.

4. US-Turkish relations in uncharted waters

Turkey's geostrategic importance to Washington has always been high. During the Cold War, "Turkey was a strategic imperative of the US" (Friedman 2012: 2). The fundamental feature that has determined the course of the relationship has been its predominantly security-oriented nature,¹⁵ without a solid social and economic basis and hence without a clearly defined list of priorities: "more like a conjectural cooperation programme."¹⁶ By most accounts, it is Turkey's strategic location, which dictates that its importance to Washington is primarily a function of US objectives in Turkey's neighboring regions. Turkey has been seen as one of the most important forward bases through which US policies in the wider Middle East region would be implemented, and has provided the US with much needed strategic depth in its regional engagement policies (Gerges 2013: 317). This assessment has rendered the relationship vulnerable and dependent on circumstantial strategic security assessments of the interests involved (GRF 2011: 19), while the profound asymmetry of power is said to be responsible for Turkey's distrust of the US (ibid.: 6).

Given an extremely complex geography of strategic requirements, it is not surprising that US-Turkish relations have been subject to great pressure in recent years. Turkey is freed from its fear of Russia. A fundamental pillar of Turkish foreign policy was gone, and with it, Turkish strategic dependence on the US (Friedman 2012: 2). For Ankara

¹⁵ After almost 50 years of alliance the trade volume has remained rather low. It is noteworthy, that despite Turkey's impressive economic performance since the mid-2000s, trade with the US reached only \$15 billion in 2010 and remains overly dependent on large US defense and aircraft sales (CFR 2012: 11).

¹⁶ See 'Ankara and Washington: What is the problem?', *Today's Zaman*, 2 November 2012, <http://todayszaman.com/news/296454>.

in the 2000s, there was an immediate existential threat no more, but its neighborhood was becoming (more) unstable and the US, following the 2003 military campaign against and the subsequent occupation of Iraq, was no longer a predictable partner. In Washington, Turkey's geopolitical value was in doubt following the fall out over Iraq. For the US Pentagon – Ankara's most ardent advocate - Turkey's strategic importance is only valued in the context of its availability to US troops (Park 2003: 9).

At the same time, in the eyes of many Turks the need for strategic support from the West and Israel had profoundly decreased and the relationship with the United States could prove “more dangerous than the threat an alliance with the United States was meant to stave off” (Friedman 2012: 2-3). In the second half of the 2000s, the EU's foot-dragging over Turkey's accession further diminished the credibility of the West. Moreover, there have been many in Turkey who began to question whether the NATO and US were still indispensable to the country's foreign and security needs (Oguzlu 2012: 153). Turkey's growing dynamism seems to solidifying the perception that NATO should not be allowed to hamper the country's regional strategies as these have been embodied in Ahmet Davutoglu's ‘strategic depth doctrine’¹⁷ which sees Turkey's regional relations as an asset used to advance its position both independently and in the eyes of the US and Europe (Sozen 2010).

¹⁷ The doctrine states that Turkey should feel the responsibility to help put its region in order. This is a mission Turkey has inherited from its Ottoman past. According to Oguzlu (2012:159-160), “the idea that Turkey needs to fulfill a particular historical mission is very much *idea-politik*. Though the fulfillment of this mission would likely serve Turkey's realpolitik concerns to have stability and security in surrounding regions, the motivating factor of Turkey's various initiatives in this regard is very much identity/ideology driven.”

The idea for the AKP leaders is reaching out to the Islamic world as an equally – to the West - important element of Turkey’s foreign policy. Davutoglu’s main argument has been that Turkey has neglected its historic and cultural ties as well as its diplomatic, economic, and political relations with the strategically critical Middle Eastern, North African and Eurasian regional complexes (Murinson 2006). In the case of the Middle East, this major policy shift has been framed in what has been described as a ‘neo-ottoman’ platform.¹⁸ According to Han (2013: 58-59) ‘for the AKP, Turkey’s Ottoman heritage introduced both as a sense of historical responsibility toward the Middle East and accorded it a sort of exceptionalism in the region. When a worldview propagates such exceptionalism and claim legitimacy from an ancient heritage, it becomes more likely that the regional assessments of decision-makers will be flawed’. Moreover, it can lead to a distorted assessment of Turkey’s relative power and influence (ibid.: 59). Under the current circumstances, Turkish cooperation in regional contingencies should not be taken for granted in Washington and elsewhere in the West (Gerges 2013: 317). Rather, more narrow definitions of interests, and a quest for more autonomy of action should be expected.

The AKP government has been unthreatened by serious political opposition for some time. It has allies in the Muslim Brotherhood movements in Egypt and beyond (some actually believe that Turkey is

¹⁸ This is how, in an AKP major address, Erdogan described his party historic mission: “On the historic march of our holy nation, the AK Party signals the birth of a global power and its mission for a new world order. This is the centenary of our exit from the Middle East... whatever we lost between 1911 and 1923, whatever lands we withdrew from, from 2011 to 2023 we shall once again meet our brothers in those lands”, (Fradkin and Libby 2013).

trying to play the role of the Muslim Brotherhood's big brother)¹⁹ while domestically Prime Minister Erdogan is said to be plotting a personal course to an all-powerful presidency in Turkey aiming at further consolidating the shift in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. It is no surprising then, that according to the results of the German Marshall Fund's 2012 Transatlantic Trends Survey, favorable opinions of the US and the EU in Turkey were the lowest among the 16 respondent samples with 34 and 36 respectively. The percentage of Turkish respondents who think that Asia is more important for Turkish national interests has been 46 percent, the highest in the survey. Only 42 percent of the surveyed Turks approved of Barack Obama's handling of international politics, the worst result with the exception of Russian respondents (26 percent); and when it comes to the handling the negotiations with Iran concerning their nuclear program, the approval goes down to 24 percent, while 27 percent of Turks accept that Iran could acquire nuclear weapons (by far the highest score with Russians at 13, the US at 8 and the EU12 at 6 percent); fighting international terrorism only 32 percent approve Barack Obama's policy with EU12 at 71, US 66 and Russia 38 percent. Interestingly, Turkish respondents approve Obama's handling relations with Russia less than the Russians themselves (36 to 38 percent)²⁰.

Implications for US interests and relevant strategies derive from Turkey's evolving democratic course²¹ as well as the foreign policy strategy

¹⁹ Samia Berkadi, 'Gulf States Rethink Ties to Muslim Brotherhood', *El-Khabar*, 16 November 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/11/gulf-states-starting-to-view-muslim>.

²⁰ German Marshall Fund of the United States, 'Transatlantic Trends 2012', www.transatlantictrends.org.

²¹ According to a CFR report on US-Turkish relations (2012: 20) "Both Turkey's authoritarian legacies and the nondemocratic remedies to which the AKP has sometimes resorted during its tenure indicate that it is too early to declare Turkey a mature, liberal democracy."

pursued by its current political leadership. Today, Turkish foreign policy is more assertive, active and diverse, across its neighborhood. Taking into account the current dynamism and growth trajectory of the Turkish economy, one cannot ignore the important economic factors related to foreign policy activism. There is a growing business class in Turkey willing to explore new markets and a government comfortable and willing to place greater affinity for the region's Muslim nations, in order to meet the demands of an expanding economy. Turkey's growing demand for energy inputs resulted in increased natural-gas imports from Russia (its largest trading partner) and Iran.

Iran's growing importance for Ankara both as a source of natural gas and a new market for Turkey's assertive export sector, should not be neglected. In the case of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the debate in Ankara seems to be mainly political rather than strategic in character. Although, "Ankara's overt rationale has been that by acting as an intermediary between Iran and the West, rather than as a strict ally of the West, it will acquire more influence over Iran" (Reynolds 2012: v), by refusing to support the economic sanctions against Tehran and by identifying Israel as part of a nuclear Iran problem, Ankara has been breaking away from the dominant assessment of the Iranian nuclear programme in the West, and has been running the risk to further polarizing its relations with Israel and the US, without actually gaining something from its engagement with Tehran. The latter's regional leadership ambitions and policies of dominating Iraq as well as strong support of the Assad regime proved to be a major obstacle, and hopes of partnership turned into bitter rivalry (Fradkin and Libby 2013). In Syria, Turkey found itself on the

other side of the Sunni-Shiite divide, confronted by Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite government in Iraq, drawn, thus, in a sectarian quagmire.

In light of the above, in the Middle East, US and Turkey while continue sharing a fundamental interest in maintaining stability, more than ever do differing perceptions, and diverging views and policy choices over key issues, namely Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict emerge. Although Washington recognizes Turkey's pivotal role in the region and its value in stabilizing US relations with the Muslim world (Gerges 2013: 316), the relationship has become more complex and sensitive as Turkey "came to border on the US by proxy" (Aydin 2009: 135) adding controversy in the Turkish public debate. The policy shift under the AKP has been so profound that many observers both Western and Turkish have questioned whether Turkey is shifting away from its traditional posture. Mustafa Aydin has gone as far as to note "the era of strategic partnership has ended" (ibid.: 140). For Reynolds (2012: vi-vii) "there is no pretense inside Ankara that its long-term interests are in fundamental alignment with those of America". For Sayari (2013: 136), perception about US declining power "have been influential in Turkey's aspirations for greater independence and strategic autonomy".

5. Turkish-Israeli relations: Lost in the mist?

The June 2010 *Mavi Marmara* 'flotilla crisis' and the 'no' vote on Iran sanctions in the UN Security Council, illustrated Ankara's shift in conducting an active but risky diplomacy across the Muslim and Arab world that might produce another slide in its relationship with the US. The incident had finally unearthed a significant strategic divergence on

the regional security imperatives with the 1990s Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership suffering a serious blow. Back in January 2009, the relationship had reached a first low turning point as a result of Israel's decision to launch a three-week offensive military operation in the Gaza Strip. For some, the clash with Israel has been in profound contradiction with the policy principle of 'zero problems' and Ankara's efforts to recalibrate the relations with the countries of the Middle East (Reynolds 2012: vi). For others, it has been a demonstration of vulnerability. While the AKP government was clearly keen to position himself as a champion of the Palestinian rights, they were, until the end of 2011, rather reluctant to stand up for the rights of Syrians, who were being massacred in large numbers by the Assad regime just across the border. The Turkish government was also distinctly ambivalent about the Libyan uprising. After initially opposing NATO military action against the Qaddafi regime, Ankara was forced to acknowledge that its political and diplomatic leverage with him was quite limited (CFR 2012: 40).

In the November 2012 Gaza crisis, Prime Minister Erdogan took his already confrontational rhetoric to another level, calling Israel a "terrorist state" and taking direct aim at the US role in the Middle East. This shows, albeit indirectly, that the Gaza crisis has emerged as a new complication in US-Turkish relations. On this issue, the two governments are clearly on different frequencies. Ankara's assessment of the Gaza developments is naturally different from that of Washington. Erdogan thinks of the Gaza issue as Turkey's own and puts the entire responsibility on Israel while backing Hamas. Moreover, with Egypt unable to continue as the leader of Israeli-Palestinian talks, Ankara sees a vacuum waiting to be filled. The US and Europe see Hamas as a

terrorist organization; Turkey affixes this label to Israel.²² Erdogan and Davutoglu seem convinced that Turkey's interests lie in the popularity on the Arab street and their ability to whip up the crowds against Israel, rather than in diplomacy, despite a few feints by the foreign minister in that direction. A self-confident and proactive Turkey does not seem to believe any longer that its role as mediator means it must maintain an equal distance from both sides or be neutral.²³ For Israel, this is a reminder that the Turkish-Israeli relations remain in crisis, mainly because Erdogan sees greater leverage for his regional agenda through his leadership and alignment with Islamic currents in the Middle East.²⁴

Turkey's great regional and international weight, however, means that diverging from the West could seriously impact on the regional balance of power and beyond. With the weakening of Egypt, old aspirations for regional primacy can become attractive again. The unraveling of the pro-Western alliance in the region, with the diluting of Egypt and Turkey's relations with Israel and the relative erosion of the US position, add up to the emergence of a regional balance of power that is rather unfavorable from Israel's perspective (Inbar 2012: 62). Israel has been

²² Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Gaza and expressed solidarity with Hamas. Ankara demanded that the White House officially recognize Hamas as a direct partner and give it assurance on behalf of Israel that if they halt their fire, Israel will do so as well. Sami Kohen, 'Gaza Complicates Turkey-US Relations', *Milliyet*, 21 November 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/11/turkey-us-relations-gaza.html>.

²³ Tulin Daloglu, 'Long Way to Normalcy For Turkey and Israel', 10 April 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/turkey-israel-apology-normalcy.

²⁴ For Eric Walberg, there are many reasons for the deterioration of the once smooth relations between Israel and Turkey: "Firstly both nations have moved away from their secular roots – Turkey with the return of Islam as a guiding principle in political life under the Justice and Development Part (AKP) in 2002, Israel with the rise of Likud in 1977 ending the long reign of Labour. Turkey is naturally returning to its traditional role under the Ottoman Caliphate as regional Muslim hegemon, while the Zionised version of Judaism has ended any pretense of the Jewish state being interested in making peace with the indigenous Muslims". See Eric Walberg, 'Turkey-Israel Relations and the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard. Turkey redraws Sykes-Picot', 30 September 2011, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/26867>.

hardly in a position to shape the environment in which it operates. The environment shaped by the peace treaties with Egypt (and Jordan) is under great strain as new and unpredictable political forces of Islamic inclination become more powerful and legitimate in their rise. With Ankara siding with Tehran on the issue of its nuclear programme, the task of containing Iran becomes even more difficult. Altogether, the 'Arab Spring' and the deterioration of the Israeli-Turkish relations have weakened significantly Israel's external balancing strategy by creating a major strategic vacuum with Turkey's willingness and ability to play any role whatsoever to the betterment of the regional security challenges in doubt. The absence of any diplomatic leverage undercuts Turkey's role to one of speech-giver rather than peacemaker.²⁵ The Middle East of today is much more radical, much more Islamic, much more religious and much more hating of Israel. The current perception in the US and Israel has been that Ankara's stance clearly undermines the already slim prospects for any meaningful solution and in the name of Islamic solidarity Ankara puts the larger security of the region at risk.

In March 2013, under the tutelage of Barack Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu issued a formal apology to Erdogan for the flotilla raid. The move was celebrated in Ankara but full normalization of bilateral relations is still far off. Nobody should expect Turkey-Israeli relations to return to the pre-2009 days. An important feature of the AKP political culture is to oppose Israel with "anti-Israelism" increasingly an eminent feature. It is doubtful whether this will change any time soon. Mutual suspicion and lack of confidence between the two will

²⁵ 'The Gaza Crisis: Will the ceasefire lead to peace?', *The Economist*, November 24, 2012.

continue for a long time, no matter what is done.²⁶ Returning to the high days of strategic diplomatic and military cooperation is not very likely. Erdogan did not decide to rupture the relationship with Israel because of the flotilla raid. There are those who believe that severing ties with Israel has been a pre-meditated decision in his course to “become the Sunni leader of the Middle East”.²⁷ A deep and lasting normalization will certainly require a strategic and geopolitical reassessment by all involved of the major regional questions like Israeli security, Palestinian statehood, Muslim alignments along the Sunni-Shiite axis etc.

The apology, though, should be seen as a way by the US to pull Turkey back in line and on the side of the US and Israel.²⁸ The role of Obama has been decisive. Washington wants the Israeli-Turkish relations reset both because it will enhance Israel’s security and because Turkey is seen as a potential facilitator in the idle Peace Process. Improving Turkish-Israeli relations and the Peace process are two different issues. But, in the context of a new US push, there is definitely a link between the two. Washington believes that in restarting the Peace Process Turkey can play a major role in smoothing the way by urging Hamas to accept the decisions of the Middle East Quartet, to recognize the existence of Israel and to abandon terrorism. Also, Turkey could contribute to the reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah.²⁹ Hamas needs all the political support it can get and continued backing from Ankara is indispensable

²⁶ Kadri Gursel, ‘Turkey Seeks Ottoman Sphere of Influence’, 3 April 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/turkey-normalization-israel.

²⁷ Ben Caspit, ‘Israeli-Turkish Reconciliation Not a Done Deal’, 23 April 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/talking-reconciliation-in-ankara.

²⁸ Tulin Daloglu, ‘Syrian Crisis Play a Major Role in Israeli Apology’, 24 march 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/israel-apology-turkey-flotilla-syrian.

²⁹ Sami Kohen, ‘US Seek Greater Role for Turkey in Mideast Peace Process’, 9 April 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/04/us-turkey-israel-role-mideast-peace-process.

for it. In that context, the change in Turkey's attitude has been important, when one thinks that Ankara diluted its position considerably: lifting the Israeli embargo and blockade on Gaza appears to be forgotten. This shows that mortgaging its relations with Israel to the Israeli-Hamas fault line, where Ankara's influence is limited at best, was a major strategic mistake.

For Israel, the apology is the product of necessity for a country isolated in its region and with new rising security anxieties. For the Israeli PM Netanyahu, it was a cool-headed strategic decision based on the fact that in Syria the crisis and the looming threat are getting worse by the minute. Developments in Syria and the possibility of chemical weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups have been prime considerations that necessitated an apology and communication with Turkey.³⁰ Although, Erdogan is not likely to renew the close strategic alliance between Turkey and Israel, there is definitely scope for a degree of normalization. The map of the Middle East is coming apart and the US is regrouping in the face of events in Syria. Turkey could derive considerable benefit from the rehabilitation of its relations with Israel.

6. Turkish sectarian engagement in Syria?

When Turkey found itself deeply involved in the Syrian civil inferno, for many this involvement indicated that the Davutoglu 'doctrine' is at a dead end, with an ill-defined strategy (towards Syria), which has backfired as the conflict has descended into sectarian warfare.³¹ Assad

³⁰ Karl Vick, 'Turkey's Triumphs', *TIME*, 8 April 2013.

³¹ Since the mid-2000s the AKP government invested in Assad and in good relations with Syria. Ankara was instrumental in bringing the Syrian regime out of international isolation

turned to Erdogan's archenemy after he greatly misjudged ancient regional realities and overestimated Turkey's capacity to influence the unfolding developments.³² An ambition to elevate Turkey to the status of regional game setter, revealed an underestimation of the complex regional demographic, religious and political make-up with deep sectarian fault-lines.³³ Ankara, clearly underestimated the resilience of the pro-Assad forces and over-estimated the willingness of the US and Europe to take the risk to forcing the Assad regime from power.³⁴ On October 4, 2012 the Turkish military pounded targets inside Syria in retaliation for a mortar attack a day earlier that killed five civilians in Turkey. Turkey's Parliament approved a motion the same day that authorized further military action against Syria and permitting cross-border raids. Earlier, in June Syrian forces had shot down a Turkish warplane with Ankara refraining from responding.³⁵

Fears of escalation have always been present but the reality is that the international community demonstrated no appetite for creating, for example, safe havens along the Syria-Turkey border or the sort of no-fly zones imposed in Iraq in the 1990s let alone engaging militarily in a

after the Hariri assassination in Lebanon and played a major role in 2007 and 2008 with its mediation efforts between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights. In April 2009, the two states conducted their first ever, joint military exercise to be followed in September by the establishment of a 'Senior Strategic Cooperation Council'. With the uprising in Syria in March 2011, Ankara tried to counsel Assad to implement social, economic and political reforms only to discover the limits of its influence. By November 2011, Erdogan called for Assad to step down and openly supported the Syrian opposition.

³² Semih Idiz, 'Turkey Miscalculates Syria', 19 March 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/turkey-davutorlu-syria-policy-failure.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Philip Stephens, 'Turkey has stumbled on the road to Damascus', *Financial Times*, Friday, October 26, 2012.

³⁵ 'Turkey's Parliament Approves Further Military Action Against Syria', *The New York Times*, October 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

violent sectarian conflict such as the one in Syria.³⁶ Russia (and China), moreover, predictably vetoed a UN Security Council statement condemning the Assad regime. Ankara, which is considerably involved in the conflict, has felt as if it has been left alone and is frustrated by the lack of international support towards more concrete and practical action. Any help would be focused on Turkish self-defence, rather than addressing the broader Syrian crisis.³⁷

What has been made clear is that the US and Europe lack the willingness (and the capability) to weather the geopolitical storms in the Middle East and Turkey – or anyone else for that matter – can hope to assume this role. And there are no good options in Syria. The fighting has unearthed the deep divisions between Sunni, Alawite, Kurd and other smaller minority groups. The anger and hatred will be long lasting. The war has affected and threatens to gravely destabilize the very fragile status quo in Lebanon and Iraq unleashing the winds of sectarian violence there. Worse, it has accentuated the Sunni-Shiite antagonisms within Islam and it has fueled the confrontations between extremists and mainstream Islam across the Arab world (Cordesman 2013). Turkey's involvement was seen as increasingly sectarian, its relations with regional actors were strained and its potential for regional leadership undermined (Grigoriadis 2012: 1). However, the hand wringing may not be politically sustainable if the Syrian crisis were to inexorably expand into Iraq, Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Pressure for more

³⁶ The only clear 'red line' laid down by the US is the use of chemical weapons. Syria has made clear it will not use them unless attacked by an outside power. 'No one, including Turkey, wants the Syrian conflict to spread', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2012.

³⁷ 'Syria and Turkey: how long can the world's great powers sit on their hands?', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2012.

direct, multilateral intervention could be harder to bear. Turkey has a big stake in the outcome of the conflict for there are two additional problems. There is a big influx of refugees, and, most importantly, there is the Kurdish dimension of the crisis.

The Syria crisis seems to have reopened the 'Kurdish issue' and showed that it has dimensions beyond being an internal problem of Turkey. It has been reported that many of Syria's Kurds hope to use the civil war as an opportunity to carve out an autonomous or even sovereign Kurdish region in Syria. For Ankara this is simply unacceptable, for such a development could embolden Kurdish separatists elsewhere.³⁸ In 2012, the PKK launched its most intense campaign against Turkish armed forces and the belief in Ankara has been that Syria's Kurds have been assisting the PKK, supported by Assad.³⁹ Emergence of Syrian Kurds under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) — seen as Syrian offshoot of the PKK — affixed regional context to Turkey's Kurdish issue. PYD has taken over control of most of Kurdish settlements along the 911 kilometers Turkish-Syrian border. In this context Iran, Baath, Baghdad, Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq and many other elements entered Turkey's Kurdish equation.

More than twenty years ago, during the first Gulf War, the notion of a divided Iraq became in fact one of Turkey's traditional nightmares. The fear was that Iraq's division would result in an independent Kurdistan, which would fuel Kurdish separatism in Turkey. That fear appears to

³⁸ Turkey has warned Masoud Barzani, president of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Administration, that the autonomous region in northern Iraq would not be applied to Syria and Turkey's stance would be very different than it was in Iraq. See 'Ankara warns Barzani over autonomy in Syria', *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 3-4, 2012.

³⁹ Amanda Paul, 'Turkey gets tough on Syria', *Sunday's Zaman*, October 7, 2012.

have receded with the economic and political ties that have developed between KRG in Arbil and Ankara. Today, the threat is seen to be coming less from the Iraqi Kurds, and more from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his overtly sectarian policies, which favor Iraq's majority Shiites against the minority Sunnis.⁴⁰ This has resulted in Ankara's providing unconditional support and refuge to Iraq's Sunni Deputy President Tariq al Hashimi, who faces a death sentence in Baghdad for allegedly setting murderous squads on Shiites in the past. Erdogan's strong criticisms of Maliki, and Ankara's open support of Iraqi Sunnis, in turn, reflect Turkey's sectarian sympathies, a fact that is also seen in Ankara's approach to the Syrian civil war. According to Tocci (2013: 2), "Turkish policies are de facto bolstering the KRG's drift towards independence".

Furthermore, Turkey's increasing cooperation with Iraqi Kurds in the strategic energy sector, which is developing over Baghdad's head, has also fueled Maliki's anger towards Turkey. Kurds claim that the oil-rich city of Kirkuk is part of their territory, a contention rejected by Baghdad, which has already resulted in a military standoff between the sides. Given Turkey's deepening relations with the KRG, its continued support for Iraqi Sunnis, and differences over Syria, tensions between Ankara and Baghdad will probably continue to fester for some time. Meanwhile, with Iraqi Sunnis taking to the street now to protest Maliki, and overall

⁴⁰ One of the principle results of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was that it released the Shiite genie out of the Middle East bottle. Clearly, in retrospect, the implication of Iraq's demographic makeup — in which the Shiites constitute the overwhelming majority — was not considered sufficiently by the Bush administration at the time. The result, with foreign Sunni Jihadist groups pitching in to turn the country into a sectarian bloodbath, is an increasingly polarized Iraq, which has come to the brink of division along ethnic and sectarian lines. The U.S. invasion of Iraq also worked to predominantly Shiite Iran's advantage, providing Tehran the opportunity to expand its regional influence by playing the sectarian card.

sectarian and ethnic tensions rising, uncertainty over Iraq's future becomes greater by the day.

In this geopolitical juncture, Erdogan realized that Turkey needs to move forward and he engaged in direct talks with Ocalan and PKK European representatives. It has not been an easy decision but it has to a large degree been the result of intense geopolitical pressures and compelling regional circumstances. Deepening trade, energy and diplomatic relations with KRG, hostility with Baghdad, the need to exert influence on Syria's autonomy-seeking Kurds have been critical determinants. Also, Turkey's open hostility against the Syrian regime resulted in a convergence between the PKK's military wing based at Iraqi Kurdistan's Kandil Mountains and the Tehran-Damascus axis. The PKK put itself squarely into the equation of the Iran-Syria axis with the support of Russia following 2011. Just as Iran and Syria have become an "ace card" for the PKK, the PKK has become more valuable for Iran and Syria than ever before. In Syria, the PKK and the PYD have placed themselves between the regime and the opposition, if somewhat nearer to the regime. They have entered a period when they will be most reluctant to disarm, becoming regional players, far beyond a mere security nuisance for Turkey.

The prospect of having to deal with an increasingly assertive Kurdish statehood-seeking population in its borders left Ankara with one viable strategic option: to work with them. It became a strategic imperative to neutralize the PKK by disengaging it from the Tehran-Damascus alliance. Turkey had no real leverage to dissuade the PKK leaders at their Kandil Mountains headquarters adjacent to Iran. Only Ocalan could exercise

real influence.⁴¹ On 21 March 2013, a cease-fire came into effect. If the talks proceed as planned and a permanent settlement is reached, this could change the dynamics both domestically and regionally.

The Syrian crisis will continue to be the source of major headaches for Ankara, which has been consistently wrong in its predictions. First, there was a miscalculation on how long Assad would last and what he is capable of doing. Second, Turkey also miscalculated Assad's isolation. Ankara truly believed that Assad's supporters could not provide anything else but moral support and the West, under the leadership of the United States and Turkey, would easily topple the regime. Yet, Iran turned out to be extremely generous when it came to providing military and economic support to Assad. Ankara underestimated Moscow's political support to Assad and the importance it attached to the survival of the regime. Finally, Turkey's unrestrained confidence in the Syrian National Council, Free Syrian Army and other armed groups fighting Assad became a serious nuisance for Ankara. Turkish diplomacy relentlessly defended Jabhat al-Nusra against the concerns and criticism of the West. Despite the risks of letting them loose, these groups were granted special border passage privileges.⁴²

The point is that neither Erdogan, nor Davutoglu — or anyone else for that matter — can say when Assad will go. Moreover, since Assad's departure doesn't automatically mean stability, the security anxieties for Turkey are likely to persist during the transition period. This increases the chances of an international arrangement brokered by the US and

⁴¹ Cengiz Candar, 'Turkey's Kurdish Initiative in Regional Context', 7 April 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/syria-iraq-aspects-turkey.

⁴² Deniz Zeyrek, 'Turkey's Syria Policy: Success or Bankruptcy?', *Radikal*, 26 May 2013.

Russia that might have Assad as some kind of actor, at least for some brief period. While Assad's remaining in power in any way is a non-starter for Turkey, the Erdogan government has come around to accepting that elements of the current Baathist regime will have to be incorporated into a transitional government⁴³ in order to maintain that country's unity. This unity has become vital for Ankara given that a division of Syria will have divisive consequences for Iraq as well.

Protracted chaos, sectarian violence and a resulting black security hole across the border, amount to a profound deterioration of the strategic environment in which Turkey has been aspiring to play a major role, and is bound to affect the nature of Turkey's relations with the US and the West in general (Lesser 2012: 2). Not so long ago, Turkey was welcoming the US retreat from the regional scene. With the Syrian conflict, it is angered by the US and NATO refusal or inability to intervene⁴⁴ or to even aid Turkey⁴⁵. What should have been clear is that the Obama administration does not view US vital interests as involved and hence, at the time of writing, Washington had no desire to intervene militarily.

⁴³ Erdogan's visit to Washington in May 2013, marked a so-called "synchronization" of Syrian policy between the US and Turkey. Representatives of the Assad government and the opposition will meet at a conference in Geneva (the so-called Geneva II). The goal would be to agree on a cease-fire and a transitional government. If the Assad side flees the table in this process, then Russia will be pressed to support sanctions at the Security Council. While the Geneva process continues, direct humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees will be increased. Covert weapons and ammunition support to the Syrian opposition will continue and necessary measures will be taken to prevent the further strengthening of internationally linked terror groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. See Zeyrek, 'Turkey's Syria Policy'.

⁴⁴ The best the US has offered is logistical and intelligence support for the rebels and humanitarian aid for the refugees. Washington has indicated that it would not supply sophisticated weapons fearing that these would fall into the hands of the Islamic militants who have flocked to the cause of the rebels.

⁴⁵ Turkey lacks important defence systems for deployment against other regional actors, such as Syria. The US has been very reluctant to export the necessary equipment, such as Super Cobras, not to mention high-tech unmanned weapons like Predators. See 'Ankara and Washington: What is the problem?', *Today's Zaman*, 2 November 2012, <http://todayszaman.com/news/296454>

Fears of escalation are quite strong and the last think Obama wants is another Iraq-type engagement by the US (Gerger 2013: 310). The US does not have the basic tools necessary for a successful escalation as it lacks the capability on the ground to ensure that the prime beneficiaries of arming the opposition in Syria will not be the regime's jihadist opponents, like Jabhat al-Nusra, who are "natural" US enemies. Estimates of the size of the Jabhat al-Nusra group vary but they may account for up to a quarter of the opposition forces in Syria.⁴⁶

Although there can be no certainty as to where Syria is going⁴⁷, as no one seems to have a clear road map as to how to end the bloodshed, what the crisis has made clear is, first, that the longer the Assad regime lasts, the worse things are likely to get. As Cordesman (2013) noted, "every current element of the present conflict is having a steadily more crippling effect and is more polarizing both within Syria and the region around it". Second, the crisis has been a manifestation of the fact that Turkey "has neither the power nor the strength to sustain a care role in Eastern Mediterranean". Rather, it remains "a plausible yet volatile actor on the edge of the subsystems of continental Europe and the Middle East" (Robins 2013: 382). Turkish policy towards Syria has been "misconceived", personal and ideology-driven, and as such unstable. Ankara chose to ignore the fact that the Syrian civil war has been "much

⁴⁶ Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, head of the U.S. Central Command, testified on 5 March 2013 at a hearing before the US Senate Armed Services Committee that the current situation in Syria is too complex to provide lethal aid to opposition forces. He noted that the rebels remain fractured, and said it is becoming increasingly clear that some of these factions are connected with al-Qaeda. See 'Arming the Syrians continues to be a bad idea', <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/287685-arming-the-syrians-continues-to-be-a-bad-idea#ixzz2NVNETHKq>, 12 March 2013.

⁴⁷ For an interesting discussion on Syria in late 2011, see Chatham House (2011), 'Scenarios for Syria', MENA Programme: Meeting Summary, www.chathamhouse.org/mena.

more about subsystemic attempts by each of the region's two main blocs – the US-led Sunni camp, incorporating the Arab Gulf, and the Iranian-led, predominantly Shii, so-called 'rejectionist faction' supported by Iraq and Hezbollah – to improve its position at its rival's expense" (ibid.: 392-3).

7. Conclusion

Despite all the joy that came with the 'Arab Spring' popular uprisings in 2011, the Arab Middle East remains a very unstable and unpredictable region where the multidimensional crisis cannot be expected to produce viable, functional and more democratic regimes anytime soon. Rather, weak states will continue to struggle both domestically and in the foreign policy conduct (Inbar 2012: 59). Also, there is no guarantee that the new regimes would be less war-prone or less autocratic, hence the risk of even greater turmoil has not decreased. Moreover, following the US withdrawal from Iraq, the partial vacuum left the door open and allowed more room for regional players to assert themselves. Such a prospect means that Washington might need to reassess its overall Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern strategy. A region embroiled in Syrian-type conflict is not the foundation for regional power and security projection it once was. Strained relations with Egypt and Turkey will complicate US strategic calculations and stability seeking (Alterman and Malka 2012: 122-123).

These realities certainly help to redefine Turkish-US relations as they have recast Turkey's regional role and its relations with Syria and Iran. The fact that Turkey is a part of a very much-unchartered regional

security complex means that US policy towards Ankara cannot but remain a subset of Washington's overall Middle East policy. However, significant differences in perceptions and policies emerged since the late 2000s that have still not been cast away and will most probably not for some time. The AKP's foreign policy agenda seems to reflect a rather sectarian approach, with emphasis on Muslim solidarity, engagement with the Middle East and embrace of actors hostile to the US, the West and Israel. This policy has been popular in the domestic arena as well as consistent with a worldview that sees Turkey the leader of Sunni Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood regimes. It has been a policy, though, that run into the political and social realities of the region. Syria turned out to be the crisis on which Turkey's Middle East engagement policy foundered in ways unexpected by the AKP leadership. Success has not been forthcoming and a process of redefinition may be underway. The gap between grand designs and the regional realities of "ferocious rivalries and inflexible dogma" is nothing but narrowing, while there are others (like Egypt) who will again try to lay claim to the leadership of an Arab world increasingly de-secularizing (Gerges 2013).

What this paper has tried to suggest is that US interests in Turkey are engaged in important ways: The US has a stake in the evolution of Turkey as an actor whose condition influences - to a point - the future of regions that matter to Washington and although Turkish-US relations had suffered serious setbacks, the US cannot afford to let the situation deteriorate further, as long as Turkey "remains a western-oriented stable country in a very problematic neighborhood" (Aydin 2009: 141)

Although the potential for regional security cooperation remains substantial, with Turkey emerging as a more independent regional player - at times even at cross-purposes with the US - and a more capable security actor in its own right, strategic convergence, though, requires new thinking. While Ankara and Washington continue to take compatible approaches to policy in some key areas (e.g. the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Caucasus region), on issues of current strategic priority - Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, the Middle East peace process and potentially Russia – differences in perception and approach are not easy to dismiss, and interpretations of security concerns do not always coincide. Although Turkish and American interests are broadly convergent, and the bilateral relationship remains heavily focused on security, rising levels of distrust has further fueled Turkish security concerns as far as the pivotal role of the US in the region while for Washington, Turkey's strategic importance in the Middle East might be diminishing.

Although US matters to most major security policy issues that confronts Turkey today and in the years ahead, Turkey matters to the US primarily as part of a wider regional security system. As the Americans set global imperatives with regional applications, of utmost importance will be the search between Turkey and the US for a balance among strategic objectives and tactical commands for the future of the region. Agreement in the first one (strategic objectives) by no means implies compatibility in the second (tactical commands). In this respect, even in areas where both have an interest, Turkey might not be the most likely agent of change, especially since there is a clear lack of willingness, at least for now.

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