

## **Turkey's Failed Policy toward the Arab Spring: Three Levels of Analysis**

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In the Turkish parliamentary elections of 12 June 2011, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a landslide victory with 50 percent of the vote. In his victory speech, Erdogan announced his regional ambitions: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir."<sup>1</sup> Western media also appeared to support Erdogan's role as a potential power broker in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). On 28 November 2011, the international editions of *Time* magazine featured Erdogan's picture on the front cover with the headline "Erdogan's Way" and an inquiring subheading: "Turkey's pro-Islamic leader has built his (secular, democratic, Western-friendly) nation into a regional powerhouse, but can his example save the Arab Spring?"<sup>2</sup>

More than three years later, one can safely say the answer to that question is "no." The democratic momentum of the Arab Spring faltered, while Erdogan's closest allies in the region—Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi and Qatar's emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani—are no longer in power. Mean-

1. "Turkey Election: Victorious Erdogan Pledges 'Consensus,'" BBC, 13 June 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13744972](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13744972).

2. "Erdogan's Way," *Time*, 28 November 2011, cover, [content.time.com/time/covers/europe/0,16641,20111128,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/covers/europe/0,16641,20111128,00.html).

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while, Erdogan has faced a resurgence of unfriendly powers in the region, such as the military regime in Egypt and the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. As Iran and Saudi Arabia wrestle for control over the region, Turkey's role as power broker has been undermined. Turkey no longer has ambassadors in Egypt, Syria, Israel, Libya, and Yemen. This has obstructed Turkey's exports to the region. The Turkish consul general in Mosul and forty-eight other consulate employees and their family members were taken hostages by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) from 11 June to 20 September 2014. Turkey's border with Syria is under the control of ISIS and militias affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Due to the ISIS threat, Turkey has evacuated its soldiers guarding the Suleyman Shah tomb, which was Turkish soil inside Syria. Turkey harbors over 2 million Syrian refugees, and nobody knows when they will go back home, if they ever will.

Why did Erdogan's regional policies fail? The answer to this question is based on three levels of analysis. At the individual level, Erdogan's foreign policy toward Arab uprisings was weakened by his populist rhetoric. Rather than pursuing a well-crafted strategy toward MENA, Erdogan has merely used foreign policy issues to energize and expand his domestic constituency. At the national level, Turkey did not have the political and economic capacity to play a leadership role in MENA. It is true that Turkey experienced stunning democratization reforms and economic growth in 2003–11, but recently it has moved toward authoritarianism, Islamist populism, and crony capitalism. At the international level, Turkey's inability to advance the reformist agenda of the Arab uprisings is grounded in two international factors: first, the growing influence of the Iran-led Shiite bloc and Saudi Arabia-led Sunni bloc and, second, the lack of Western support for Arab democratization, in general, and for Turkey's regional policies, in particular.

In order to reassert itself as a regional power, Turkey needs to have leadership that makes at least relatively greater distinction between short-term party politics and long-term regional goals, to expand its political and economic capacity, and to strengthen its ties with the United States and the European Union in order to effectively contend with rival Iranian and Saudi Arabian blocs.

### Individual Level of Analysis: From Kemalism to Erdoganism

Kemalism is the founding ideology of the Turkish Republic, named after the first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.<sup>3</sup> The secularist and nationalist character of Kemalism was crucial in shaping Turkey's policies toward the Arab world and Arab culture. Kemalist reforms in the 1920s and 1930s included the replacement of the Ottoman Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet, the removal of many Arabic words from the Turkish language, and the abolition of Arabic language education in schools. The new Turkish Republic aimed at becoming part of Europe and distancing itself from its "Oriental" past. This trend characterized Turkish foreign policy for decades.<sup>4</sup> The main Kemalist party, the Republican People's Party, gained a plurality in only four of sixteen democratic parliamentary elections in Turkish history; it has never won the majority of votes or parliamentary seats. Nonetheless, Kemalists preserved their dominance in Turkish politics by their influence in the military, judiciary, and the media.<sup>5</sup>

In power since the 2002 elections, during its first two terms the AKP had to share power with the Kemalists. Therefore it had to be moderate in domestic and foreign policy. During this period, the AKP pursued a nonconfrontational foreign policy. It endeavored to solve long-term problems with Turkey's neighbors (Syria, Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia) and to play a mediation role between conflicting parties (Syria and Israel, Palestinians and Israel, Hamas and Fatah, and Pakistan and Afghanistan). Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu formulated these policies under the guiding principle of "zero problems with neighbors."<sup>6</sup>

3. See Şükrü Hanioglu, "The Historical Roots of Kemalism," in *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey*, ed. Ahmet T. Kuru and Alfred Stepan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

4. Turkey did engage with Arab countries during this period. Its dispute over Cyprus and its need to develop strong economic ties with oil-rich neighbors provided major incentives for Turkey to improve the relations with the Arab world and to pursue a relatively more active role in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s. Mahmut Ali Baykan, "Turkey and the OIC: 1984–1992," *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations* 23 (1993): 102–8; Mahmut Ali Baykan, "The Palestinian Question in Turkish Foreign Policy from the 1950s to 1990s," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 1 (1993): 93–7.

5. For Kemalist foreign policy, see Umut Uzer, *Identity and Turkish Foreign Policy: The Kemalist Influence in Cyprus and the Caucasus* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Hasan Kösebalaban, *Turkish Foreign Policy: Islam, Nationalism, and Globalization* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

6. Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys\\_zero\\_problems\\_foreign\\_policy](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys_zero_problems_foreign_policy).

Under AKP rule, Turkey's relations with Arab countries deepened. This transformation started with an accidental event. In 2003, a minority of the AKP parliamentarians joined with the opposition in refusing a proposal that would allow US soldiers to deploy to Turkey for the invasion of Iraq, despite Erdogan's very strong support for the proposal. This refusal proved to Arab leaders that Turkey could indeed say "no" to the United States. Later, Turkey's relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Qatar gradually improved. With the support of key Arab countries, a Turkish citizen, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, became the secretary general (2005–13) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).<sup>7</sup> In 2010, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan signed a regional cooperation agreement, allowing for visa-free travel among them and enhancing economic cooperation.

The Erdogan government, however, was caught unprepared by the wave of Arab uprisings in 2011. Regimes that it had been courting for about a decade began to fall. The Erdogan government adopted a new, interventionist approach toward MENA, which constituted a clean break from the "zero problems" framework.<sup>8</sup> Erdogan became the first leader to demand that Hosni Mubarak step down in Egypt, and his government vigorously supported the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime. The swiftness of Erdogan's support to the Syrian opposition was partially due to his regret over having delayed supporting the revolution in Libya. Three years after the uprisings began in Egypt and Syria, it would be fair to say that Turkey's policies toward both have failed. As shown in the following paragraphs, Erdogan's one-man rule and populist rhetoric were major reasons for this failure.

When the AKP's third term started in 2011, the Kemalists influence over the media, judiciary, and military was already marginalized.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile,

7. For more on the OIC, see Turan Kayaoğlu, "A Rights Agenda for the Muslim World? The Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Evolving Human Rights Framework," Analysis Paper no. 6 (Doha, Qatar: Brookings Doha Center, January 2013).

8. Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy and Regional Political Structuring," *TEPAV Turkey Policy Brief Series*, no. 3 (2012): 3–4; Tarık Oğuzlu, "The 'Arab Spring' and the Rise of the 2.0 Version of Turkey's 'Zero Problems with Neighbors' Policy," *SAM Papers*, no. 1 (February 2012).

9. See Ahmet T. Kuru, "The Rise and Fall of Military Tutelage in Turkey: Fears of Islamism, Kurdistan, and Communism," *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 2 (2012): 37–57; Michael A. Reynolds, "Echoes of Empire: Turkey's Crisis of Kemalism and the Search for an Alternative Foreign Policy," Analysis Paper no. 26 (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, June 2012).

Erdogan monopolized the authority within the AKP. He also personally filled the vacuum left by Kemalism in Turkish politics. His one-man rule has been observed in almost all aspects of Turkish politics. He has determined the AKP's candidate lists on parliamentary and even municipal elections, chosen laws to be passed in parliament, and decided on major government tenders, with attention to minute details. Erdogan's advisors and confidants, such as Hakan Fidan, the chief of the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), has been more prominent than even cabinet ministers. Regarding Turkish foreign policy, neither President Abdullah Gul nor parliamentarians nor bureaucrats in the ministry of foreign affairs played major roles in the decision-making process. Prime Minister Erdogan only permitted Foreign Minister Davutoglu to have an influence over Turkish foreign policy from 2011 to 2014. In 2014, the former was elected as the president and the latter became prime minister. Since then, Erdogan has still had the primary role in Turkish foreign policy while leaving a limited position to Davutoglu.

A major characteristic of Erdogan's style is the prioritization of domestic politics over foreign policy. In other words, Erdogan uses international relations primarily as an instrument to expand and energize his constituency. The contradiction between populist aims and foreign policy goals may be a problem for leaders in other countries as well. Yet in Turkey what makes this a much bigger problem is the increasing power consolidation around Erdogan personally, which does not allow for any institutional framework in conducting foreign policy. Moreover, with respect to his political style, Erdogan tends to favor engaging in polemics,<sup>10</sup> and he assumes that such polemics may increase his vote shares.

With respect to the Syrian and Egyptian uprisings, the Erdogan government needed strong support from the United States and Western European countries. Nevertheless, Erdogan's populist attitudes weakened Turkey's ties with Western allies. Since the *Mavi Marmara* incident in 2010, Erdogan has constantly and severely criticized Israel. This attitude has mostly served to energize his constituency by creating an image of a strong, regional leader. This also ended some Arab countries' criticisms of Turkey for being too close

10. As an example, on 23 October 2013, Erdogan visited Kosovo and said, "Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey." This provoked a major diplomatic crisis between Serbia and Turkey.

to Israel. Nevertheless, Erdogan's criticisms did not result in any major positive benefit for Palestinians, because his remarks were not part of a well-crafted strategy.

Erdogan's populism also caused problems in Turkey's ties with the EU.<sup>11</sup> In April 2011, he addressed the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. When a French parliamentarian asked a question about rights of religious minorities in Turkey, Erdogan replied, "I believe this friend is French? She is also 'French' to Turkey," implying a colloquial phrase in Turkish about being unfamiliar with something. The parliamentarian regarded the response as "disrespectful," "aggressive," and "insulting" not only to herself but to the French nation.<sup>12</sup> In Turkey, however, Erdogan's statement made the headlines of several Turkish media outlets as another achievement in defending national pride, and it energized Erdogan's constituency in the elections two months later.

Erdogan's populist rhetoric without a strategy also upset his allies in Syria and Egypt. Over the past four years, Erdogan has frequently threatened Assad, receiving excited applause from his supporters in Turkey. Yet his actions against Assad remained limited. In May 2011, Erdogan declared that Turkey would not tolerate mass killings in Syria. He declared that Turkey does not want "to experience Hama and Homs [massacres] again. If something like this is done again . . . Turkey will have to do what it has to do."<sup>13</sup> A member of Syrian opposition—the Syrian National Council—who was very sympathetic to Turkey told this author that after Erdogan's remarks, many Syrians anticipated a Turkish military operation against the regime's massacres; the lack of such action created a certain level of disappointment.<sup>14</sup>

Erdogan has employed a populist rhetoric decorated with "R4BIA"<sup>15</sup> signs,

11. Erdogan's discourse has also been imitated by his cadre. The minister for EU affairs Egemen Bagis, for example, saw no problem of publically making fun of some European leaders, such as Nicholas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel.

12. Marc Champion, "Erdogan and the Not So French," *Emerging Europe* (blog), *Wall Street Journal*, 15 April 2011, [blogs.wsj.com/emerging-europe/2011/04/15/erdogan-and-the-not-so-french/](http://blogs.wsj.com/emerging-europe/2011/04/15/erdogan-and-the-not-so-french/).

13. "Erdoğan Siyaset Meydanına Soruları Cevapladı," *Zaman*, 3 May 2011, [http://www.zaman.com.tr/politika\\_erdogan-siyaset-meydanina-sorulari-cevapladi\\_1128941.html](http://www.zaman.com.tr/politika_erdogan-siyaset-meydanina-sorulari-cevapladi_1128941.html).

14. Member of Syrian opposition, interview with the author, Doha, 16 December 2012.

15. R4BIA is a stylized version of the word *rabia* expressing solidarity with anticoup protesters in the Rabia Square in Cairo. The word *rabia* literally means "fourth," which is why the four-fingered hand gesture is used.

his four fingers, and harsh criticisms of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi following the 3 July 2013 coup d'état in Egypt. He even claimed that “the ballot boxes will be empowered in March [2014 municipal elections in Turkey] with the spirit of martyr Asma who was the symbol of the Egyptian Revolution.”<sup>16</sup> This rhetoric may have motivated his constituency, but it did not help the Muslim Brotherhood in any useful way. Instead, it ruined any possibility of Turkey playing an intermediary role between the Egyptian generals and the Muslim Brothers. Moreover, Erdogan's accusation of Israel being behind the Egyptian coup d'état created a diplomatic crisis between Turkey and the United States in August 2013. The evidence Erdogan showed was a statement, made at a panel discussion in Israel right before the election of Morsi, by the Jewish French philosopher, Bernard-Henri Levy, supporting any means to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from coming to power, even if it won the elections. The White House condemned Erdogan's remarks; in response, Erdogan publically criticized the White House. This exchange happened when there was an international reaction to the chemical attacks on the outskirts of Damascus. Erdogan could have focused on persuading the Barack Obama administration to carry out a military strike against the Assad regime instead of engaging in such a superfluous debate.

Before the Arab uprisings, Davutoglu was regarded as someone who could balance Erdogan's populism with his focus on foreign affairs and professorial style. Nonetheless, Davutoglu's performance since 2010 has not been better than that of Erdogan. Several of his statements have shown a teleological, even utopian understanding of world affairs.<sup>17</sup> He repeatedly argued that Turkey was on “the right side of history,” without specifying how and in what sense.<sup>18</sup> In an overly romantic statement, Davutoglu depicted the twentieth century as a simple “parenthesis.” His implicit argument is that the twentieth century was a mistake between the Ottoman's nineteenth century and Turkey's twenty-first century. In his words, “We will close this parenthesis.

16. “Erdoğan: Bunların İnine Gireceğiz,” *Cumhuriyet*, 1 March 2014, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/46275/Erdogan\\_\\_Bunlarin\\_inine\\_girecegiz.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/46275/Erdogan__Bunlarin_inine_girecegiz.html). Asma Al-Beltagi, the daughter of a Muslim Brotherhood leader, was killed by Egyptian security forces on 14 August 2013.

17. Birol Başkan, “Teleolojik Tarih Okuması ve Türkiye'nin Dış Politikası,” *T24.com*, 8 November 2013, [t24.com.tr/haber/teleolojik-tarih-okumasi-ve-turkiyenin-dis-politikasi/243602](http://t24.com.tr/haber/teleolojik-tarih-okumasi-ve-turkiyenin-dis-politikasi/243602); Behlül Özkan, “Turkey, Davutoglu, and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119–40.

18. Davutoğlu, “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy,” 6.

Without waging any war, without declaring anyone as enemy, without disrespecting any border, we will link again Sarajevo to Damascus, Benghazi to Erzurum and Batumi. This is the source of our power.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the Kemalists, a main domestic critic of the AKP's foreign policy is the Hizmet movement led by Fethullah Gulen. Until recently the movement was a strong supporter of the AKP. The main rift between them occurred in the wake of the *Mavi Marmara* incident in 2010, when Gulen criticized the way the flotilla operation led to casualties.<sup>20</sup> The movement's disagreements with the Erdogan government's foreign policy can be summarized in four points. First, the movement has focused on Turkey's domestic issues, such as ending the military's “tutelage” over politics and containing terrorist acts by the PKK. The movement does not want Turkey to be part of regional adventures while it still has many domestic problems. Second, the movement has sought to further strengthen Turkey's relations with the United States and the EU. Therefore, it regarded some of Erdogan's moves—such as antagonizing Israel or opposing new United Nations sanctions against Iran—as a risky enterprise. Third, the movement has prioritized Turkey's relations with Central Asia and pursued the building of strategic alliances with Turkic republics, while the AKP has focused on MENA.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the movement has been critical of the AKP for ignoring the expanding Iranian influence in both MENA and Central Asia.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, Erdogan's populist rhetoric, combined with Davutoglu's romanticism, has constituted a major reason for Turkey's failed policies toward Arab uprisings. In the future, Turkey will need a more realistic leadership that makes more distinction between populist party politics and national foreign

19. Ensar Tuna Alatürk and Fatih Karakılıç, “Davutoğlu: Yüz Yıl Sonra Bu Parantezi Kapatıyoruz,” *Zaman*, 3 March 2013, [www.zaman.com.tr/politika\\_davutoglu-yuz-yil-sonra-bu-parantezi-kapatiyoruz\\_2060493.html](http://www.zaman.com.tr/politika_davutoglu-yuz-yil-sonra-bu-parantezi-kapatiyoruz_2060493.html).

20. Joe Lauria, “Reclusive Turkish Imam Criticizes Gaza Flotilla,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 June 2010, [www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704025304575284721280274694](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704025304575284721280274694).

21. In fact, the Hizmet movement has recently tried to increase its activities in MENA. It also publishes *Hira*, a magazine of Islamic sciences, in Arabic.

22. In his analysis of Fethullah Gulen's understanding of Turkish foreign policy, Hasan Kösebalaban defines Turkish republics as Gulen's allies, Western countries as his friendly competitors, and Iran as his main security concern. Hasan Kösebalaban, “The Making of Enemy and Friend: Fethullah Gulen's National Security Identity,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003). I would add China as a long-term security concern for Gulen.

policy strategies. Turkish leaders should either refrain from making bold statements or back up their words with action to maintain their credibility among Western and Middle Eastern actors. This requires a more institutionalized and long-term decision-making process instead of a personal and ad hoc approach to conducting foreign policy.

### **State Level of Analysis: Turkish Policy toward Syria and Egypt**

Turkey's interest in the MENA region expanded during AKP rule. Yet Turkey failed to play an "order maker" role in the region, which was optimistically asserted by Davutoğlu.<sup>23</sup> There are still very few MENA experts in Turkish universities, think tanks, and bureaucracy. Turkey's ministry of foreign affairs has barely made progress in this direction; the number of Arabic-speaking diplomats increased from ten in 1990 to only twenty-six in 2011. Out of 135 Turkish diplomats working in over twenty Arab countries, only six spoke Arabic as of 2012.<sup>24</sup> In comparison, the United Kingdom had six Arabic-speaker diplomats in its Libya embassy alone.<sup>25</sup> Turkey needs to invest more resources in training its academics, analysts, and diplomats who focus on the region before making any claims about regional leadership.

The most crucial countries in Turkey's policy toward the Arab uprisings were Syria and Egypt. Syria was important because of Turkey's long border with it, and Egypt was significant as a leading Arab country. When the uprising began in Syria, Turkey had three options:

1. Backing civilian opposition in addition to encouraging peaceful, civil disobedience
2. Supporting military opposition with its own military capacity as an assurance to avoid massacres
3. Supporting military opposition with a North Atlantic Treaty Organization guarantee to avoid massacres

23. "Davutoğlu: Türkiye Düzen Kurucu Bir Ülke," *Hürriyet*, 23 June 2009, [www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/11929480.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/11929480.asp).

24. Osman Bahadır Dinçer and Mustafa Kutlay, "Turkey's Power Capacity in the Middle East: Limits of the Possible," USAK Reports no. 12-04 (Ankara: International Strategic Research Organization, June 2012), 2.

25. Christopher Phillips, "Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy," Chatham House MENAP Briefing Paper no. 4 (London: Chatham House, December 2012), 5.

Turkey quickly dropped the first option, acted as if the second one was possible, and did not have any serious calculation about the possibility of the third one.

More than two hundred thousand people have died so far in the Syrian civil war. Let alone preventing massacres in Syria, Turkey did not even sufficiently retaliate when Syria downed a Turkish military jet or allegedly staged twin bombings in the border town of Reyhanli—the deadliest single terrorist act in Turkish history—in which at least fifty-one died. Israel, by contrast, showed its military superiority by several air strikes against Assad regime targets when it perceived threats, such as possible transfer of chemical weapons to Hezbollah. There were also reports about heavy weapon transfers from Syria to the PKK, but Turkey did not use military force to stop any such moves.

Several observers initially assumed that Turkey had the capacity to use military force unilaterally against the Assad regime. This was based on events in 1998, when Turkey threatened Syrian president Hafez Assad with a military attack if he kept harboring the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Assad was so afraid that he immediately expelled Ocalan and agreed to other demands by Turkey. Since then, Syria appeared to have advanced its military and political position with Russian and Iranian support, while Turkey's position seemed relatively weaker with its deteriorating relations with Israel and tensions with its Western allies.<sup>26</sup>

Turkey supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA) by various means. Nonetheless, the FSA has recently lost ground, not only to the Assad regime, but also to ISIS, the al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, and the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD). The division within the opposition has helped the survival of the Assad regime.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the radical-

26. In fact, Israel was willing to cooperate with Turkey against the Assad regime, but Turkey rejected such a possibility. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the need to cooperate with Turkey on the Syrian crisis was a major motive behind Israel's apology for the *Mavi Marmara* attack. Herb Keinon, "Syria Crisis Necessitated Turkey Apology," *Jerusalem Post*, 24 March 2013, [www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Syria-crisis-necessitated-Turkey-apology-307535](http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Syria-crisis-necessitated-Turkey-apology-307535).

27. Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Syria's Assad Accused of Boosting al-Qaeda with Secret Oil Deals," *Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 2014, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html).

ism of ISIS and the Nusra Front fatally damaged the international reputation of the Syrian opposition. The Erdogan government did not take sufficient precautions against these radical groups. It has also been criticized for allowing recruits for these groups to use Turkish soil to reach Syria.<sup>28</sup> A US Treasury Department report claimed that al Qaeda has a network that “uses Iran as a transit point for moving funding and foreign fighters through Turkey to support al-Qa’ida-affiliated elements in Syria.”<sup>29</sup> In a recent statement the Financial Action Task Force, an international body affiliated with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development for combating terrorist financing, categorized Turkey in the “grey list” together with Algeria, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen, because “concerns remain regarding Turkey’s framework for identifying and freezing terrorist assets.”<sup>30</sup> Even Erdogan’s meeting with Obama in May 2013 became tense due to this concern: “Mr. Obama delivered what US officials describe as an unusually blunt message: The US believed Turkey was letting arms and fighters flow into Syria indiscriminately and sometimes to the wrong rebels, including anti-Western jihadists.”<sup>31</sup> Turkish authorities have strongly and repeatedly rejected these accusations.

This issue also created public controversy in Turkey. The corruption probe, which started on 17 December 2013, extended to an investigation about close personal relations between Erdogan and Yasin al Qadi, a Saudi Arabian businessman who was accused of being an al Qaeda financier and who was designated by the US Treasury Department as a “specially designated

28. Turkey has even been criticized for supporting jihadists. Salih Muslim, PYD’s leader, interview, “Türkiye’den Silah Geliyor,” *Hürriyet*, 27 January 2014, [www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/25661278.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/25661278.asp); Ahmet Şık, “TIR’daki Sır Aydınlandı,” *Cumhuriyet*, 13 February 2015, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/213863/\\_TIR\\_daki\\_sir\\_aydinlandi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/213863/_TIR_daki_sir_aydinlandi.html).

29. US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets Networks Linked to Iran,” press release, 6 February 2014, [www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx](http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx).

30. Financial Action Task Force, “FATF Public Statement,” 14 February 2014, [www.fatf-gafi.org/countries/s-t/turkey/documents/public-statement-feb-2014.html](http://www.fatf-gafi.org/countries/s-t/turkey/documents/public-statement-feb-2014.html). The only cases in the “black list” were Iran and North Korea. See also Human Rights Watch, *You Can Still See Their Blood: Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2013), [www.hrw.org/node/119645/section/11](http://www.hrw.org/node/119645/section/11), 93–4.

31. Adam Entous and Joe Parkinson, “Turkey’s Spymaster Plots Own Course on Syria: Hakan Fidan Takes Independent Tack in Wake of Arab Spring,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 October 2013, [www.turkishnews.com/en/content/2013/10/10/turkeys-spymaster-plots-own-course-on-syria/](http://www.turkishnews.com/en/content/2013/10/10/turkeys-spymaster-plots-own-course-on-syria/).

global terrorist.”<sup>32</sup> Erdogan blocked the entire corruption probe but could not stop the leak of documents about his several meetings with al Qadi, some of which were also joined by Fidan.<sup>33</sup> In January 2014, Turkish prosecutors and police launched a probe against al Qaeda affiliates, but the Erdogan government immediately dismissed police chiefs who carried out the operation. Also, prosecutors, policemen, and gendarmerie searched several trucks going to Syria, based on a tip-off that they were carrying ammunition and weapons. The drivers and escorts appeared to be members of Turkey's MIT. The Erdogan government stopped the search, removed the officers and prosecutors from their offices, and started criminal investigations against them. Another major problem is hundreds of Turkish jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq, which has the potential to turn Turkey's role into something similar to that of Pakistan during the Afghan jihad in the 1980s and its aftermath.<sup>34</sup>

The Erdogan government was also ineffective in supporting its allies in Egypt—Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Its \$2 billion financial aid to the Morsi administration was significant but less than the \$12 billion Saudi Arabia and its allies gave to the post-Morsi military regime. The Erdogan government did not provide meaningful support to Morsi against the coup, either. In response to such criticism, Davutoglu claimed that Turkey's spy chief Fidan met with Morsi about two weeks before the coup and gave him a list of recommendations. The list then made the headline in a progovernment newspaper. It includes five items:

1. Increasing the level of consultations with other political parties
2. Focusing on tourism in order to solve economic problems
3. Cleaning cities, with Turkey providing 150 garbage trucks

32. Yassin Abdullah Kadi v. Timothy Geithner et. al., Civil Action no. 09-0108 (JDB), US District Court for the District of Columbia, 19 March 2012, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-dcd-1\\_09-cv-00108/pdf/USCOURTS-dcd-1\\_09-cv-00108-0.pdf](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-dcd-1_09-cv-00108/pdf/USCOURTS-dcd-1_09-cv-00108-0.pdf); Office of Foreign Asset Control, “Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List,” 20 February 2014, US Department of Treasury, Washington, DC, [www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/t11sdn.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/t11sdn.pdf), 72.

33. “Meeting behind the Closed Doors Exposed,” *Today's Zaman*, 22 February 2014, [www.todayozaman.com/national\\_meeting-behind-closed-doors-exposed\\_340140.html](http://www.todayozaman.com/national_meeting-behind-closed-doors-exposed_340140.html).

34. “Turkish Interior Ministry: 500 Citizens Fighting with al-Nusra in Syria,” *Today's Zaman*, 26 November 2013, [www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy\\_turkish-interior-ministry-500-citizens-fighting-with-al-nusra-in-syria\\_332467.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_turkish-interior-ministry-500-citizens-fighting-with-al-nusra-in-syria_332467.html).

4. Visiting the United States and Iran first before visiting Turkey
5. Sending Egyptian bureaucrats to Turkey for training.<sup>35</sup>

It would be a waste of time to examine the several absurdities in this list. More reasonable and serious recommendations to Morsi could include encouraging him to declare early presidential election in order to avoid the coup, in addition to providing him intelligence about the military generals' plans and their international connections.

In the last few days before the coup, there was no sign that the Erdogan government encouraged Morsi to make compromises, unlike the Obama administration, which tried to convince Morsi to transfer his power to a newly appointed prime minister in order to avoid a full-blown crisis.<sup>36</sup> The Erdogan government's reaction following the coup was also unrealistic. It totally ignored that some segments of Egyptian society supported the coup. Instead, the Erdogan government strongly backed Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins after the coup, which resulted in a tragic number of casualties, believing they could bring Morsi back in to power. By doing so, Erdogan dismissed any possibility of playing an intermediary role between the Muslim Brothers and Egypt's powerful generals.

In sum, Turkey's military and diplomatic capacity was not sufficient to shape Syrian and Egyptian politics. Even the idea of the Turkish model of democratization and economic development, which was seen as attractive at the beginning of the Arab Spring, is no longer valid due to the recent rise of authoritarianism and crony capitalism in Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Given its own shortcomings, the most reasonable strategy for Turkey would be to cooperate with its NATO allies in order to pursue regional goals. This is particularly essential for responding to the challenges of the Iran- and Saudi Arabia-led blocs.

35. "Darbe Geliyor Tedbir Alın," *Star*, 23 August 2013, [haber.star.com.tr/politika/darbe-geliyor-tedbir-alin/haber-783203](http://haber.star.com.tr/politika/darbe-geliyor-tedbir-alin/haber-783203).

36. David D. Kirkpatrick and Mayy El Sheik, "Morsi Spurned Deals, Seeing Military as Tamed," *New York Times*, 6 July 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/world/middleeast/morsi-spurned-deals-to-the-end-seeing-the-military-as-tamed.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/world/middleeast/morsi-spurned-deals-to-the-end-seeing-the-military-as-tamed.html?_r=0).

37. Ahmet T. Kuru, "Muslim Politics without an 'Islamic' State: Can Turkey's Justice and Development Party Be a Model for Arab Islamists?" Policy Briefing (Doha, Qatar: Brookings Doha Center, February 2013); A. Kadir Yildirim, "Clientelism 2.0 vs. Democracy in Erdogan's 'New Turkey,'" *Monkey Cage* (blog), *Washington Post*, 13 March 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/13/clientelism-2-0-vs-democracy-in-erdogans-new-turkey/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/13/clientelism-2-0-vs-democracy-in-erdogans-new-turkey/); "Turkish Politics: Everything Is Possible," *Economist*, 1 March 2014, [www.economist.com/news/europe/21597936-uncertainty-grips-country-another-scandal-engulfs-recep-tayyip-erdogans](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21597936-uncertainty-grips-country-another-scandal-engulfs-recep-tayyip-erdogans).

**International Level of Analysis:  
Iranian and Saudi Challenges, Western Allies**

This section examines the extent to which Turkey has employed the aforementioned strategy during the Arab uprisings.

**Iran-led and Saudi Arabia-led Blocs**

Iran hindered Turkey's goal of toppling the Assad regime in Syria, while Saudi Arabia supported the coup d'état against Turkey's ally Morsi in Egypt. In a broader sense, democratic transitions in Arab countries have been largely thwarted due to resistance from a Shiite bloc led by Iran (including Iraq's central government, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Assad regime in Syria) and a Sunni bloc led by Saudi Arabia (comprising the United Arab Emirates [UAE], Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan).

With a combination of financial incentives and coercive means, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have prevented protests at home while also helping their allies crack down on the opposition.<sup>38</sup> During the 2011 unrest in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent one thousand troops and five hundred policemen, respectively, to support the Sunni monarch against Shiite-led protestors. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have felt deeply threatened by the wave of Arab uprisings, particularly the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Except in the cases of Libya and Syria, the Saudi Arabia-led bloc opposed the Arab uprisings to various degrees. Saudi Arabia provided asylum to Tunisia's toppled leader Zine Ben Ali and medical treatment to Yemen's dictator Ali Saleh, while Ahmad Shafiq, the last prime minister of Egypt's Mubarak, fled to the UAE after having lost the presidential election to Morsi. The Saudi Arabia-led bloc also provided financial support for the July 2013 military coup in Egypt.

The two blocs are locked in conflict over Syria. Along with Russia, Iran and its allies have invested diplomatic, financial, and military resources to assist the Assad regime, while Saudi Arabia has been instrumental in sup-

38. See F. Gregory Cause III, "Kings for All Seasons: How the Middle East's Monarchies Survived the Arab Spring," Analysis Paper no. 8, Brookings Doha Center, September 2013.

porting the political and military branches of the resistance. The survival of the Assad regime and the military coup in Egypt have represented a significant reversal for the Arab uprisings. Authoritarian forces have appeared to be growing stronger across the region.

Turkey's foreign policy failures during the Arab uprisings mainly lie in its inability to build an alternative bloc that can counteract Iranian and Saudi actions. The AKP politicians and Turkish diplomats interviewed during the spring of 2013 generally depicted Turkey as the sole actor that nurtures good relations with all countries in MENA and refused to define Iran or Saudi Arabia as rivals. Perhaps this naïve perception is one of the reasons why Turkey has remained unprepared to compete with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Although Turkey tried to build a regional alliance, its attempts were not sufficiently systematic. Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, Qatar has been Turkey's closest ally in the region.<sup>39</sup> Domestically, Qatar helped the AKP with the acquisition of Turkey's second biggest media conglomerate, the Sabah-ATV group, by providing a quarter of the funding. Internationally, Turkey and Qatar have cooperated on a number of issues, such as providing financial aid to the Morsi administration, supporting the Syrian opposition against Assad, and providing asylum to the top Sunni Arab politician in Iraq—fugitive Iraqi vice president Tariq al-Hashimi—who was sentenced to death in absentia. Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt played an important role in mediating the November 2012 cease-fire between Hamas and Israel. On 25 June 2013, however, Qatar's emir stepped down, and eight days later Morsi was deposed. Turkey's relationship with Qatar started to follow a lower profile, while Turkish-Egyptian relations reached a new low point.

In January 2013, this author conducted interviews in Cairo with twenty Egyptian politicians and academics to assess their perceptions of Turkey. Those interviewed—not only the members of the ruling Muslim Brotherhood but also others—expressed a desire for strengthening the relationship between Turkey and Egypt.<sup>40</sup> Some interviewees lamented that Turkey's rela-

39. Qatar has a tiny population (less than 300,000 citizens and less than 2 million in total), but its gross domestic product of \$173 billion is close to Egypt's \$230 billion.

40. Examples include the author's interviews with the following, 19–25 January 2013, Cairo: Amr Darrag, chairman of foreign relations, Freedom and Justice Party; Ambassador Hesham Youssef, former campaign Manager of Amr Moussa; Senator Tamer Mekky, Asala Party; Mahmut Shirbini,

tionship with Egypt was confined to official channels; they argued that there were not sufficient Turkish-Egyptian interactions through business, civil society, or media channels.<sup>41</sup> The interviewees who were concerned about foreign influence mostly mentioned Saudi Arabia's support for Egyptian Salafi movements. Most of the interviewees refused to see a Turkish-Egyptian alliance as a force to counterbalance Iran's power in the region.<sup>42</sup> According to these interviewees, Egypt's relations with Iran were important in order to counter the power of Israel. A major concern stressed by several interlocutors was that the AKP was overly invested in the Muslim Brotherhood, while failing to reach out to other Egyptian political actors.<sup>43</sup> The rapid deterioration in relations between Turkey and Egypt following the 2013 coup confirmed this concern.<sup>44</sup>

In sum, Turkey has been unable to build an alternative bloc to outweigh the blocs led by Iran and Saudi Arabia, mainly as a result of the 2013 military coup in Egypt and the survival of the Assad regime in Syria. The Iranian bloc poses a particular threat to Turkey because its three members—Iran, Iraq, and Syria—surround Turkey's entire southern and southeastern borders and maintain complex relations with the PKK.<sup>45</sup>

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senior politician, Wasat Party; Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, professor of political science, Cairo University; Ramy Shaath, coordinator of Free Egyptian Movement; and Mohammed Kadry Said, retired major general, Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

41. Mustafa Zehran, chief editor of news, *Al-Mesryoon* newspaper, interview with the author, 17 January 2013, Cairo; Eid Mohamed, professor of Near Eastern studies, SUNY Binghamton, interview with the author, 22 January 2013, Cairo.

42. Examples include 'Fahmi Huweydy, journalist and writer, interview with the author, 22 January 2013, Cairo; Kamal Helbawy, former spokesperson of the Muslim Brotherhood in the "West," interview with the author, 21 January 2013, Cairo.

43. During author's interviews in Tunis, Tunisia, between 28 March and 3 April 2013, several politicians and intellectuals similarly stressed their concern that the Erdogan government focused too much on its relations with ruling Islamist al-Nahda while ignoring other Tunisian parties. In 2014, secularist Nidaa Tounes won both presidential and parliamentary elections, after which Turkey's relations with Tunisia worsened.

44. During author's interviews in Cairo in January 2013, a former senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood noted with pride, "It took [Turks] twenty years to solve the problem of civil-military relations, but we did it in just two years." Several opposition figures, however, stressed that this was a naïve claim; five months later, they were confirmed by the military coup.

45. "Iran Allegedly Offering Military Aid to PKK for Not Withdrawing from Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, 29 April 2013, [www.todayzaman.com/diplomacy\\_iran-allegedly-offering-military-aid-to-pkk-for-not-withdrawing-from-turkey\\_314042.html](http://www.todayzaman.com/diplomacy_iran-allegedly-offering-military-aid-to-pkk-for-not-withdrawing-from-turkey_314042.html).

The Erdogan government has had a puzzling relationship with Iran. In 2010, it cooperated with Brazil to play an intermediary role on the Iranian nuclear issue. Turkey and Brazil voted against a US-backed proposal at the UN Security Council for new sanctions targeting Iran. Then, Erdogan made up with the United States by accepting the deployment of NATO's antimissile radar system in Eastern Anatolia as part of the shield against Iran, notwithstanding Iranian protests. Neither this tension nor the proxy war between Turkey and Iran over Syria stopped the improvement of Turkish-Iranian relations, including intelligence sharing. In November 2013, the Iranian ambassador to Turkey declared that Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and its Turkish counterpart MIT are in close collaboration.<sup>46</sup>

Following the corruption scandal revealed on 17 December 2013, the Erdogan government faced increasing criticism about its opaque relations with Iran. The central figure in the corruption probe was an Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab who was accused for bribing three cabinet ministers and transferring billions of dollars to Iran in order to bypass the sanctions over that country. When Zarrab was released from the prison, despite serious charges and publicized evidence, Erdogan said, "Justice has been served." Critics have asked why the Erdogan government helped Iran to get around sanctions at a time when Turkey and Iran were clashing over Syria. Erdogan's visit to Iran, just two months after the corruption scandal began, increased the level of criticisms. He made the visit together with five ministers and declared that Iran is like "his second home."<sup>47</sup>

One explanation of the Erdogan government's strong relations with Iran is the presence of an Iranian lobby in Turkey.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the number of newly founded Iranian companies in Turkey increased from 419 in 2006–9

46. "MOIS ve MİT İşbirliği İçinde!" *Aksam*, 29 November 2013, [www.aksam.com.tr/dunya/mois-ve-mit-isbirligi-icinde/haber-265031](http://www.aksam.com.tr/dunya/mois-ve-mit-isbirligi-icinde/haber-265031). See also David Ignatius, "Turkey Blows Israel's Cover for Iranian Spy Ring," *Washington Post*, 16 October 2013, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-turkey-blows-israels-cover-for-iranian-spy-ring/2013/10/16/7d9c1eb2-3686-11e3-be86-6aeaa439845b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-turkey-blows-israels-cover-for-iranian-spy-ring/2013/10/16/7d9c1eb2-3686-11e3-be86-6aeaa439845b_story.html).

47. "Prime Minister Erdogan Says Iran Is like His 'Second Home,'" *Today's Zaman*, 29 January 2014, [www.todayszaman.com/latest-news\\_prime-minister-erdogan-says-iran-is-like-his-second-home\\_337891.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/latest-news_prime-minister-erdogan-says-iran-is-like-his-second-home_337891.html).

48. See Gökhan Bacık, "The Iranian Lobby in Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, 26 February 2012, [www.todayszaman.com/columnist/gokhan-bacik/the-iranian-lobby-in-turkey\\_272537.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/gokhan-bacik/the-iranian-lobby-in-turkey_272537.html).

to 1,864 in 2010–12.<sup>49</sup> An alternative explanation is that Turkey needs to maintain good relations with Iran because it is dependent on Iranian natural gas. Particularly in the case of Syrian civil war, the two main supporters of the Assad regime are Turkey's biggest natural gas providers—Russia (50 percent of Turkish imports) and Iran (20 percent of Turkish imports).<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, critics accused the Erdogan government for not trying to diversify Turkey's natural gas suppliers, particularly by not importing more from two Turkic republics—Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.<sup>51</sup>

In any case, if Turkey had been so dependent on Russian and Iranian natural gas then it should have embraced a much more modest attitude in the Syrian uprising from the very beginning. Instead, it encouraged both the civilian and armed branches of the Syrian opposition and made some bold claims about the foreseeable fall of the Assad regime. Both the analysis of Turkey's capacity in the previous section and the examination of its relations with Iran in this section have revealed that Turkey did not have the internal or external conditions needed to depose Assad single-handedly. Thus it needed the backing of its NATO allies in order to topple the Assad regime.

### NATO Allies

The Erdogan government has had various tribulations in terms of its relations with the United States and Turkey's European allies. Davutoglu kept repeating that regional problems should be dealt within the region,<sup>52</sup> implying that the West should let Middle Eastern countries solve their own problems. This seems contradictory to the Erdogan government's critique of NATO for not having launched a military operation against the Assad regime. Erdogan

49. "Türkiye'de Kurulan İranlı Şirket Sayısı Patladı," *Zaman*, 21 December 2013, [www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi\\_turkiyede-kurulan-iranli-sirket-sayisi-patladi\\_2186634.html](http://www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi_turkiyede-kurulan-iranli-sirket-sayisi-patladi_2186634.html).

50. Other natural gas exporters to Turkey are African countries (20 percent) and Azerbaijan (10 percent). "Doğalgaza Ambargo Türkiye'yi Yıkar," *Hürriyet*, 24 October 2012, [www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/21766797.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/ekonomi/21766797.asp).

51. "İran Doğalgazında Skandal," *Zaman*, 31 January, 2014, [www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi\\_iran-dogalgazinda-skandal\\_2196675.html](http://www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi_iran-dogalgazinda-skandal_2196675.html); "İran'a Boru Hattı Kıyağı," *Zaman*, 4 March 2014, [www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi\\_irana-boru-hatti-kiyagi\\_2203017.html](http://www.zaman.com.tr/ekonomi_irana-boru-hatti-kiyagi_2203017.html).

52. "Davutoglu: Regional Problems Necessitate Regional Reactions," Anadolu Agency, 26 April 2013, [www.aa.com.tr/en/headline/167713--d](http://www.aa.com.tr/en/headline/167713--d).

had a similar attitude during the Libyan revolution. At the beginning, he asked, “What has NATO to do in Libya?” Shortly after that, however, his government joined to the NATO operation against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

The reason for this inconsistency has been the gap between Turkey’s limited military, diplomatic, and economic capacity, on the one hand, and Erdogan and Davutoglu’s populist discourse about “Turkey’s grandeur,” on the other. While Turkey needs Western support,<sup>53</sup> the AKP leaders have used populism to appeal their constituency by describing Turkey as a regional order maker. In the case of Syria, for example, Erdogan and Davutoglu made confident statements against Assad. The Turkish military, however, could not even protect its territory against possible missile attack from Syria; therefore, it asked help from NATO. Since January 2013, American, German, and Dutch Patriot missile batteries have protected Turkey.

Obviously, one cannot blame Turkey for the lack of sufficient Western support for democratization during Arab uprisings. In general, Western support to democracy in a particular region has been contingent on Western interests and ideological threat perceptions. During the Cold War, for example, the United States supported authoritarian regimes in Latin America and MENA as a bulwark against communism. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the “Islamist threat” replaced the “communist threat” in MENA. Since then, the United States and its European allies have shaped their agenda for the MENA region based on four main priorities: (1) avoiding new Islamist regimes, (2) protecting Israel, (3) stabilizing oil supplies, and, more recently, (4) fighting terrorism. Western support for the 1992 military coup against the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria is one example that shows that democratization in MENA has not been at the top of the Western list of preferences. In spite of this, some progress was made during 2004–5 when the George W. Bush administration encouraged democratic elections in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine while also urging Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to embrace political reforms. These policies, however, did not endure, due mainly to the electoral victories of Islamist parties across the region.

The Barack Obama administration’s Middle East policy has also been

53. See Ziya Öniş, “Turkey and the Arab Spring: Between Ethics and Self Interest,” *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 3 (2012): 45–63.

plagued with contradictions. Obama's Cairo speech in 2009, calling for political liberalization throughout the region, created expectations for a new, prodemocracy US policy. When the Arab Spring broke out one-and-a-half years later, the Obama administration cautiously supported change. The NATO operation against the Gadhafi regime gave momentum to the Arab uprisings. Unlike in Algeria in 1992, Western countries tolerated the electoral victories of Islamists both in Egypt and Tunisia. The AKP's positive experience in Turkey in 2002–11 seemed to convince Western countries that moderate Islamist governments could grow to be reliable allies.

Nevertheless, Western perceptions of the Arab Spring have been marred by a series of events, including the murder of the US ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens; jihadists' growing role in the Syrian conflict; and the authoritarian tendencies of the Islamist rule in Egypt. Despite the death of two hundred thousand Syrians and a dire humanitarian crisis, the United States and its European allies have refrained from intervening militarily in Syria. They have also been hesitant to condemn the July 2013 military coup in Egypt, which led to the death of over one thousand protestors.

Turkey has been unable to play a role in bridging the contradicting interests of Western powers and Islamist actors. In January 2012, Obama named Erdogan as one of the five leaders in the world with whom he had "bonds of trust."<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, the relationship between the two leaders sharply deteriorated in late 2013 and 2014 for various reasons, such as the lack of improvement in Turkish-Israeli relations, the disagreement between Obama and Erdogan on the Syrian civil war, and Erdogan's brutal crackdown during the Gezi events.

Instead of repairing his relations with NATO allies, Erdogan has recently taken surprisingly counterproductive initiatives. In 2013, his government decided to buy a \$3.4 billion long-range antimissile system from a Chinese company that has been blacklisted by the United States for selling arms to Iran and Syria.<sup>55</sup> Also in 2013, Erdogan asked Vladimir Putin on two different occasions to accept Turkey as a member of the Shanghai Coopera-

54. Fareed Zakaria, "Inside Obama's World: The President Talks to *Time* about the Changing Nature of American Power," *Time*, 19 January 2012, [swampland.time.com/2012/01/19/inside-obamas-world-the-president-talks-to-time-about-the-changing-nature-of-american-power/](http://swampland.time.com/2012/01/19/inside-obamas-world-the-president-talks-to-time-about-the-changing-nature-of-american-power/).

55. "Turkey Says Open to Alternatives to Chinese Missile Defense System," Reuters, 2 February 2014, [www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/02/us-turkey-china-defence-idUSBREA1108L20140202](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/02/us-turkey-china-defence-idUSBREA1108L20140202).

tion Organization, proposing it as an alternative to Turkey's EU membership bid.<sup>56</sup> According to one interpretation, Erdogan is seriously thinking about changing Turkey's orientation away from NATO and the EU and toward a partnership with Russia and China. An alternative reading is that he is simply bluffing in order to prove his importance for the United States and to force the EU to accelerate Turkey's membership process. In any case, Erdogan's initiatives have not served to strengthen Turkey's relations with its NATO allies at a time when Turkey needs their support in its policies toward Syria and Egypt.

In sum, Turkey has failed to effectively respond to the challenges of Iran and Saudi Arabia during the Arab uprisings. While these two countries have established strong alliances with their neighbors, the Erdogan government has become isolated in the region. The Erdogan government also failed to strengthen partnership with its NATO allies to outweigh Iran and Saudi Arabia. Western countries have also made various mistakes in their policies toward the Arab Spring and their relationships with Turkey. They have had double-standards about democracy in MENA, embraced certain anti-Islamist prejudices, ignored Israel's violation of Arab (and even Turkish) rights, resisted Turkey's EU membership, and refused transferring adequate military technology to Turkey. Despite these problems, it is still in Turkey's best interest to regenerate its relations with NATO allies.

## Conclusion

The Arab Spring, which began with great hopes for a wave of democratization in the MENA region, stalled in the face of civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen and harsh repressions in Bahrain and Egypt and resulted in democracy only in Tunisia. Turkey has been unable to achieve its main goal of regime change in Syria, and its relationship with Egypt is now much worse than in the Mubarak era. Turkey has made mistakes at the leadership, state, and international levels, which led to such policy failures.

56. The organization includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. "Turkish PM Erdogan to Putin: Take Us to Shanghai," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 November 2013, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-to-putin-take-us-to-shanghai.aspx?PageID=238&NID=58348&NewsCatID=359](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-pm-erdogan-to-putin-take-us-to-shanghai.aspx?PageID=238&NID=58348&NewsCatID=359).

At the individual level, Erdogan has tried to replace Kemalism with his one-man rule. He has used foreign policy issues, such as Turkish policy toward MENA, as a means to energize his constituency. His populist discourse achieved this goal, but led to various diplomatic problems. At the state level, Turkey did not have military or diplomatic capacity to be the engine of the Arab Spring. Particularly, recent corruption scandals have revealed that Turkish democracy is still very fragile and its economy can be called crony capitalism. At the international level, Turkey has been unable to respond the challenges by two competing power blocs, one led by Iran and the other led by Saudi Arabia. The former protected the Assad regime by any necessary means, while the latter provided crucial financial cover for Egypt's generals. While Turkey needs the support of its NATO allies, Erdogan's populist discourse and authoritarian policies have deteriorated Turkish-Western relations.<sup>57</sup>

The three levels of analysis help one understand what Turkey might do in the future if it seeks to play a more successful role in MENA. First, Turkey needs a new style of leadership in conducting its foreign policy. A country cannot effectively pursue regional policies if one person maintains tight control of almost everything. Seeking long-term strategic goals requires functioning institutions, participatory decision-making mechanisms, and professionalization. Moreover, Turkish politicians should, at least, tone down populist rhetoric. Second, Turkey ought to be aware of its military and diplomatic limitations while pursuing an ambitious regional policy agenda. It should also halt policies of authoritarianism and crony capitalism at home, in order to become a regional inspiration for democratization and economic development. Finally, Turkey has to acknowledge that Iranian-led and Saudi Arabian-led blocs are its competitors. The Islamist rhetoric, which has been recently prevailing in Turkey, has overemphasized religious identities at the expense of national interests. Such a perception can put Turkey in a disadvantageous position while Iran and Saudi Arabia are expanding their regional influences.

57. During the Gezi events and the corruption scandal, Erdogan promoted anti-Western conspiracy theories in order to cover up his responsibility on these crises. See Hakkı Tas, "Anti-Westernism in Turkey," *Open Democracy*, 11 March 2014, [www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/hakki-tas/anti-westernism-in-turkey](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/hakki-tas/anti-westernism-in-turkey).

The best strategy for Turkey in order to compete with the regional influences of Iran and Saudi Arabia is to strengthen its cooperation with NATO allies. Repairing relations with Western countries might also better position Turkey to help maintain a dialogue between them and Arab Islamists. A better dialogue between Western and Arab Islamist actors is significant for the future democratization of MENA.<sup>58</sup> Turkey can persuade the United States and Western European countries that relying on Arab autocrats, such as the Egyptian military and the House of Saud, is not a good long-term strategy, given the Arab populations' growing dissatisfaction with authoritarianism. Turkey can also play an intermediary role in convincing Islamists across the region that anti-Western sentiments do not serve their interests.

58. See Ahmet T. Kuru, "Democracy and Authoritarianism in Muslim Countries: Rentier States and Regional Diffusion," *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 3 (2014): 426–7.