

Too big for its boots

Turkish foreign policy towards
the Middle East from 2002 to 2018

CRU Report

Erwin van Veen
Engin Yüksel



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

Too big for its boots

Turkish foreign policy towards
the Middle East from 2002 to 2018

Erwin van Veen
Engin Yüksel

CRU Report
July 2018

July 2018

© Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

Cover photo: New Presidential Compound in Ankara, AOÇ (Beştepe) © Wikimedia

Unauthorized use of any materials violates copyright, trademark and / or other laws. Should a user download material from the website or any other source related to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', or the Clingendael Institute, for personal or non-commercial use, the user must retain all copyright, trademark or other similar notices contained in the original material or on any copies of this material.

Material on the website of the Clingendael Institute may be reproduced or publicly displayed, distributed or used for any public and non-commercial purposes, but only by mentioning the Clingendael Institute as its source. Permission is required to use the logo of the Clingendael Institute. This can be obtained by contacting the Communication desk of the Clingendael Institute (press@clingendael.org).

The following web link activities are prohibited by the Clingendael Institute and may present trademark and copyright infringement issues: links that involve unauthorized use of our logo, framing, inline links, or metatags, as well as hyperlinks or a form of link disguising the URL.

About the authors

Erwin van Veen is a senior research fellow with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. A political scientist by training, Erwin applies this lens to the analysis of relations between political order, security and justice in conflict-prone environments. Extensive travel in the Middle East also generated Erwin's lasting interest in the region's conflicts.

Engin Yüksel is a PhD candidate at Leiden University who studies contemporary manifestations of hybrid warfare.

The Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

Follow us on social media

-  @clingendaelorg
-  The Clingendael Institute
-  The Clingendael Institute
-  clingendael_institute
-  Clingendael Institute

Email: cru@clingendael.org
Website: www.clingendael.org/cru

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | 1 |
| Acknowledgement | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| 1 Turkey's domestic politics: AKP rule since 2002 | 6 |
| Towards domestic hegemony: Push and pull factors | 10 |
| The 2015 electoral calculus and the Kurdish issue | 14 |
| 2 How domestic politics reverberated in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East | 16 |
| Exhibit 1: Turkish foreign policy towards Syria | 22 |
| Exhibit 2: Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq | 29 |
| Exhibit 3: Turkey's position amid Iranian – Saudi rivalry | 31 |
| Conclusion | 33 |

Abstract

Over the past 16 years, Turkey has replaced its peaceful, economically-based foreign policy towards the Middle East with a more security-focused one that includes greater support for the Muslim Brotherhood, deals aggressively with Kurds in both Turkey and Syria, and adds a growing Eurasian focus to its traditional Western emphasis. These foreign policy developments have largely happened as a result of the deep and prolonged domestic political contestation over the Turkish state that occurred between 2002 and 2018. Understanding Turkish domestic politics requires understanding the development and fortunes of the political party that has been dominant since 2002 – the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP). From its pragmatic and moderate Islamist beginnings – which saw the AKP make representative popular politics and a liberal market economy a reality in Turkey – we are now seeing the reassertion of statism, nationalism and authoritarianism under the cloak of the party’s revived religious conservatism.

The results are profoundly illiberal within the country’s borders and have reduced both the scope and effectiveness of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East as it has become less predictable, more revisionist and lacks an overall strategy. More specifically, gradual rifts are discernible in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from promoting ‘regional economic cooperation’ (about 2002 to 2010) to ‘Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Sunni sectarianism’ (about 2011 to 2015) and ‘anti-Kurdish militarism’ (about 2015 to 2018).

The initial period of regional economic cooperation fitted comfortably with the continuation of many traditional elements of broader Turkish foreign policy (i.e. modernisation, a Western focus and EU accession talks). Yet, the following periods that featured more focus on Sunni sectarianism and enmity towards the region’s Kurds introduced tensions and dissonance between Turkey’s Middle Eastern policies and aspects of wider Turkish foreign policy. In general, nationalistic, personal and religious assertiveness made for a more ad-hoc and explosive mix. While the AKP’s focus on achieving control over the Turkish state, with support from the Gülenist movement (see Box 1), was well served by a ‘status quo’ foreign policy during the first period, this was not the case for the second and third periods during which AKP political dominance alternated with new challenges to its rule from the Gülenist movement and Turkey’s Kurds.

This has profoundly changed Turkey’s position in the Middle East and in the West. Instead of a regional role model and soft power, Turkey has become a conflict party. Turkish relations with its neighbouring Syrian regime have nosedived and, although it has successfully contained the region’s Kurds, this has been at the price of resuscitated

Kurdish nationalism and militancy. Moreover, it has raised growing distrust among Ankara's Western allies –without Turkey having an alternative in terms of economic relations – and its institutionalised partnerships with the US/Europe have been downgraded. As the recent elections are unlikely to bring greater stability to Turkey's domestic politics in the near future, it is to be expected that these risks will deepen.

A productive approach for European countries is to deal with Turkey as a society caught between the rock of a prolonged authoritarian domestic crisis and the hard place of regional power competition. One practical element of such an approach is to keep the economic relationship as stable as possible to dampen further shifts towards populism and strong-arm politics. Another practical element is to stimulate Turkish-Kurdish dialogue as well as remaining democratic and liberal elements of Turkish civil society with the aim of supporting more balanced understandings of democracy than purely majoritarian ones. Through this mix, European countries can strike a balance between the interest of good neighbourliness and providing a modest counterweight to Turkey's growing authoritarianism. In the process, they should expect little change of Turkish interests and behaviour in either Syria or Iraq.

Acknowledgement

The report is part of Clingendael's Levant research programme that analyses hybrid security organisations – armed groups that simultaneously compete and cooperate with the state – in Syria and Iraq in the context of Iranian, Turkish and Saudi foreign policy. More about this research programme, including its publications to date, can be found here: <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>.

The present report is based on analysis of open online sources in both English and Turkish, including media reporting, analyses produced by think tanks and academic writings.

Its authors are grateful to Dick Zandee and Ana Uzelac (both with the Clingendael Institute) for their review, and for the critical comments that were generously provided by an external reviewer who preferred to remain anonymous.

The contents of the report are naturally the responsibility of its authors.

Introduction

The recent deal between Turkey and the United States (US) on the governance of the Syrian town of Manbij marks the provisional culmination of the Turkish military campaign against the Kurds in Syria. It foresees the withdrawal of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from the city, which will enable Turkish-backed armed proxies to establish control.¹ The deal seals Turkish control over the Afrin area, provides a launch pad for potential military operations towards the east and handily resolves the risk of confrontation between Turkey and YPG-allied US forces in the area. The Turkish army and its auxiliaries took control of Afrin with a speed and success that are remarkable given the mix of mountainous and urban terrain that its recently purged forces had to contend with.² The entire episode has also become yet another of the many unexpected twists in the Syrian civil war.

However, the Turkish invasion did not materialise overnight. Rather, it is the product of a series of domestic, regional and global political developments over the past 16 years. This report examines shifts in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East between 2002 and 2018 on the basis that they are largely a function of the country's domestic politics.³ In the case of Afrin, Turkey's unresolved domestic 'Kurdish issue', which reignited in force after the 2015 Turkish elections, is the key explanatory factor. A country's foreign policy is of course also influenced by regional and global events.⁴ In addition, domestic developments influence foreign policy and foreign policy is used for domestic purposes.⁵ Nevertheless, on balance, our analysis suggests that domestic Turkish politics are the more decisive variable for understanding the country's foreign policy towards the Middle East. This should hardly

1 See: [Al-Monitor](#), 5 June 2018 and [Stratfor](#), 5 June 2018 (both accessed 28 June 2018).

2 The Turkish military perspective is extensively analysed in these two reports: Kasapoglu, C. And S. Ülgen (2018a), *Operation Olive Branch: A political-military assessment*, Istanbul: EDAM; Kasapoglu, C. And S. Ülgen (2018b), *Turkey's Operation Olive Branch Enters A New Phase*, Istanbul: EDAM. See also: [Al-Monitor](#), 29 May 2018 (accessed 28 June 2018); Hähnlein, R. and G. Seufert (2018), *Der Einmarsch der Türkei in Afrin*, Berlin: SWP.

3 A more general reflection on this premise can be found here: Mahnken, T. (2016), 'Strategic Theory', *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, Oxford: OUP.

4 Jabbour (2011), for example, identifies six factors driving Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East since 2007. Four are domestic and two international. See: Jabbour, J. (2011), 'The AKP's foreign policy towards the Middle East: Changes with continuity or rupture with past practices?', *Bilgi* (23), pp. 125-148.

5 Danforth (2008) argues that Turkish foreign policy has mostly been pragmatic in nature, but he constructs his case against the premise of a number of authors that the Islamist ideology of the AKP has been the critical driver of Turkish foreign policy. In this report, we consider AKP ideology as only one of many elements of Turkish domestic politics. See: Danforth, N. (2008), 'Ideology and pragmatism in Turkish foreign policy: From Atatürk to the AKP', *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 3.

come as a surprise given the work-in-progress that the Turkish state-building project has proven to be over past decades.

For this report, it is argued that Turkish domestic politics between 2002 and 2018 feature four key developments. To start with, the political ascent of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) gradually removed the Turkish military from its decade-long role as (in)formal guardian of the Kemalist state⁶ with the help of the Gülenist movement as the party's key ally. Once this had been accomplished, the AKP subsequently broke with its erstwhile ally. These processes culminated in the 2016 attempted coup.⁷ In the same period, the religious character of the AKP grew in tandem with its political strength. This has meant that, particularly since 2007, Islamist and statist policies have gradually become more prominent after an initially more progressive and liberal period of AKP rule. Linked to this, the AKP's majoritarian understanding of democracy and its authoritarian reflexes triggered a dynamic process in which electoral success and state control reinforced each other to keep the party in power.⁸ Ultimately, their interaction produced a broad range of illiberal effects. Finally, the power base and role of one person within the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has consolidated in the form of a rewrite of Turkey's constitution creating a powerful presidency and suggesting an overall regression of the independence and plurality of Turkish state institutions.

There have been many foreign policy reverberations from these developments. Critical junctures include: a shift from Turkey's initially peaceful, economically-based foreign policy to a more aggressive, security-focused one; an increase in support for the Muslim Brotherhood and armed Sunni groups across the region, particularly after 2011; a shift from seeking a deal with Kurds in Turkey to a much more antagonistic policy towards Kurds in Turkey, Syria and – to a lesser extent – Iraq; and a shift from a pro-Western foreign policy orientation to a mixed Western-Eurasian one.

The report explores linkages between these domestic political developments and shifts in Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. In a bid to make sense of such profound changes, the report starts with a short analysis of the political fortunes of the AKP between 2002 and 2018 (Section 1). Subsequently, it takes a closer look at the reverberations of key domestic trends and events in Turkish foreign policy through a mix of general analysis and three short exhibits – Syria, Iraq and Iran/Saudi Arabia (Section 2). It closes with a few forward-looking reflections relevant to policy makers in both the region itself and in Europe.

6 The ideas and principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder and first president of the Turkish Republic, are termed 'Kemalism'. They center around the notions of modernisation, secularism and Westernisation.

7 This is extensively discussed in: Kandil, H. (2016), *The Power Triangle: Military, security and politics in regime change*, Oxford: OUP.

8 On this point and the previous: Mandaville, P. (2014), *Islam and politics*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge; Kaya, Z. (2016), *The AKP and Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East*, London: LSE Middle East centre collected papers, Vol. 5.

1 Turkey's domestic politics: AKP rule since 2002

The AKP's rise to become Turkey's pre-eminent political party must be seen in a context of decades of enforced secularism, statist policies, nationalist militarism and unstable party politics. Whereas Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) astutely assessed and respected the geopolitical interests of the great powers when establishing Turkey, he also imposed his vision of socio-political order on the diverse territories and people that became Turkey within these great power constraints. This included the view that religious practices, especially religious influences in the public domain, constituted a brake on progress while a strong central state was key to accelerating Turkey's modernisation. Being a military officer himself, he moreover made sure that a nationalist military would safeguard the Turkish state's pro-Western and secular ideological orientation, as well as its national unity in terms of territory and identity. This formula proved effective in establishing and developing the Turkish state in its initial period, arguably even into the 1980s. Yet it also suppressed strong currents of Islamism and anti-Western sentiments in Turkish society, not to mention alternative identities such as the Kurds and Alevis. A strong central state dominated by the military and with a fixed nationalist, secular and pro-Western outlook also did not leave much space for competitive party politics and true popular representation.⁹

In a sense, the AKP's electoral rise in 2002 can be regarded as the point at which suppressed undercurrents positioned themselves with increasing forcefulness against decades of secularism, militarism and statism. The AKP initially packaged its ideology in a moderate, pragmatic and broad political platform that was attractive to entrepreneurs, the rural poor and Kurds. It appears, however, that from the start the authoritarian and statist features of the past were already grafted onto its majoritarian understanding of democracy – inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideology.¹⁰ And so, paradoxically, by 2018 the AKP has reproduced some of the elements it militated against in 2002, such as a fusion between political and economic interests, a strong central state and an exclusive nationalist project. This is not to argue that all was planned in a grand master-strategy, but rather that past dependencies have played a greater role in the AKP's development than might be generally appreciated.

9 Cleveland, W. (2004), *A history of the modern Middle East*, 3rd edition, Boulder: Westview; Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*; Mandaville (2014), *op.cit.*

10 Mandaville (2014), *op.cit.*; Kaya (2016), *op.cit.*

The AKP was formed in 2001 by Islamic activists who freed themselves from the 'clutches of Islamic ideology to appeal to larger groups of the electorate'.¹¹ More precisely, the AKP replaced the 'Islamism' of the *Milli Görüş Hareketi* (National Vision Movement)¹² variety with 'conservative democracy'. This enabled the AKP to attract Islamist, right-wing and liberal voters *and* to pass muster with Turkey's military.¹³ In a sense then, the AKP created a makeshift bridge between 'Islamism, democracy and nationalism'.¹⁴ Its initial pragmatism, belief in open markets and attractiveness to millions of conservative Turkish Muslims brought the AKP significant electoral success in 2002 and 2007.¹⁵

After coming to power, the AKP launched a diverse bundle of reformist, liberal and pro-poor policies that catered for different social groups. This represented a refreshing change from the state's habit of prioritising and dictating collective interests to the masses. Erdoğan, the new Prime Minister, framed the Kurdish question as Turkey's long-standing internal problem that needed to be resolved in ways other than through forced assimilation. He started enacting structural reforms, such as further democratisation, strengthening civilian oversight over the security forces, revisiting Turkey's security paradigm and improving human rights.¹⁶ Whether he ever intended to really address the core demands of Turkey's Kurds has been a matter for debate, but the years of negotiations with both political and militant Kurdish representatives indicate some seriousness. It should also be noted that desecuritisising the Kurdish problem through political negotiations helped AKP efforts to reduce the military's role in the country's governance.¹⁷ Today this is hardly necessary as the AKP has established firm control over the Turkish military, especially following several rounds of Gülenist purges that took place after the 2016 attempted coup (see below).

11 Heper, M. and Aylin G. (2000), 'The Military and the Consolidation of Democracy: The Recent Turkish Experience', *Armed Forces and Society*, 26 (4), p.649.

12 The NVM is a religious-political movement founded by Necmettin Erbakan in 1969 and is part of a much larger transnational Muslim Brotherhood network. Although Erdoğan and Gül (President of Turkey 2007–2014) used to support the NVM, they founded the AKP by renouncing NVM's agenda.

13 Öktem, K. (2011), *Turkey since 1989: Angry Nation*, London: Zed Books.

14 Bilici, M. (2006), 'The Fethullah Gulen Movement and Its Politics of Strategic Representation in Turkey', *The Muslim World* 96, p.4; Onis, Z. (2007), 'Conservative Globalism at the Crossroads: The Justice and Development Party and the Thorny Path to Democratic Consolidation in Turkey', *Mediterranean Politics*: 14 (1), p. 22

15 Tezcür, G. Murat (2016), 'Historical and Contemporary Trends in the Turkish Political Party System', *The AKP and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, *Middle East Centre*. Vol.5, p.9.

16 T.C. Başbakanlık Kamu Düzeni ve Güvenliği Müsteşarlığı (2013), 'Sessiz Devrim Türkiye'nin Demokratikleşme ve Dönüşüm Envanteri 2002-2012', online: www.akparti.org.tr/upload/documents/sessiz_devrim.pdf (accessed 18 April 2018).

17 Balta, E., 'The pendulum of democracy: The AKP government and Turkey's Kurdish conflict', in: Kaya (2016), *op.cit.*

During its first term (2002–2007), the AKP also achieved considerable success in uplifting a moribund Turkish economy by bringing down the inflation rate to c. 9 per cent and by generating an annual economic growth rate of 7–10 per cent.¹⁸ On the back of a series of reforms towards liberal democracy, including AKP peace overtures towards Turkey's Kurds, negotiations for European Union (EU) membership started in 2005. As a result of these developments, the US came to see the 'AKP's Turkey' as a 'beacon of democracy in the Muslim World'.¹⁹

However, between the next two elections (in 2007 and 2015) the initial honeymoon period between the AKP and important segments of Turkish society and between Turkey and its Western partners progressively wore off. The 2007 elections saw the AKP winning 46.5 per cent of the vote, increasing its electoral support base by c. 12 per cent.²⁰ This landslide emboldened the AKP to seek 'ideological hegemony'²¹ over the Turkish political landscape, together with its Gülenist allies (more below). To do so, they used their strong grassroots base, growing presence in the state apparatus and sizeable educational/social service delivery footprint.²² However, by 2015 the AKP stood once more at the crossroads of success and failure due to a deepening split with its erstwhile Gülenist allies, anti-Kurdish policies and electoral losses. In response, it employed street fighter survival strategies in a naked competition for political power that triggered the 2016 coup attempt, but also assured increasing AKP capture of the state, a change of the Turkish constitution in the party's favour (and president), and yet another electoral victory in June 2018.

The shifts in the AKP's foreign policy from 2002–2010 ('regional economic cooperation') to 2011–2015 ('Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Sunni sectarianism') and 2015 to 2018 ('anti-Kurdish militarism'), can be explained by a mix of at least four key domestic political push and pull factors that are illustrated in Figure 1 and further analysed below.²³ Initially, the AKP was consolidating and testing its rule, as well as catering to its broad support base in a tangible manner via pro-business and pro-poor policies. This

18 Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*

19 Keyder, Ç. (2004), 'The Turkish Bell Jar', *New Left Review*, 28, p. 84.

20 Close examination of several elections casts doubt on the perception that the AKP's electoral support stems mostly from rural areas. For instance, almost 50 per cent of Turkey's major cities like Istanbul and Ankara voted AKP in the general elections of October 2015 and in the referendum of April 2017. Moreover, AKP mayoral nominees were elected in 7 of the 10 most populated cities in Turkey's 2014 municipal elections. Detailed election results can be found here: <https://secim.haberler.com> (Turkish) (accessed 29 June 2018).

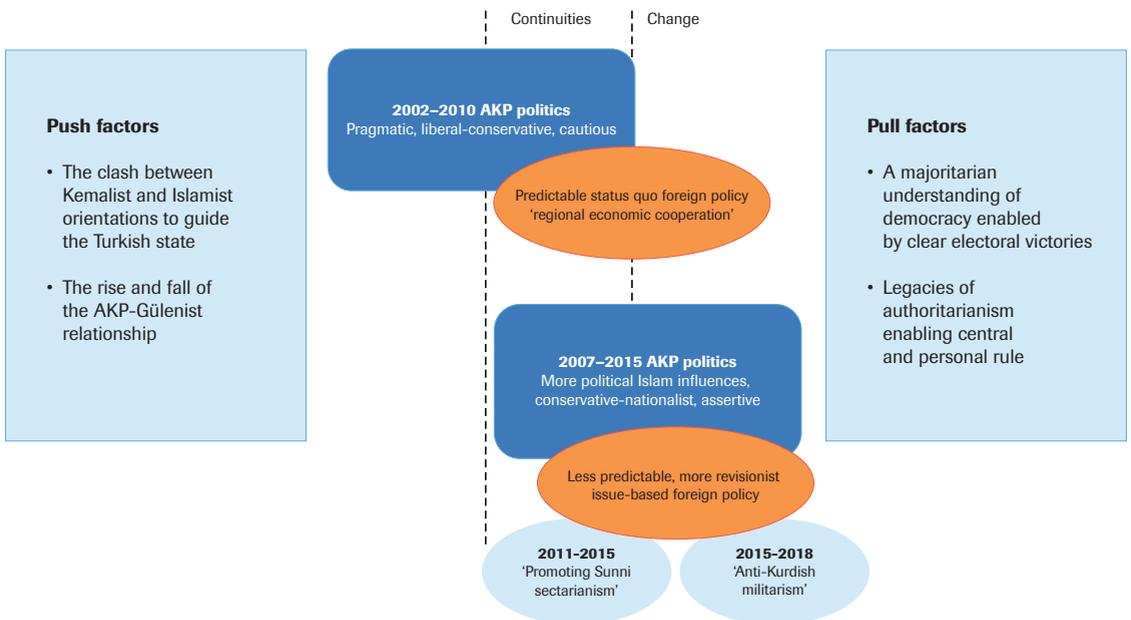
21 On the notion of hegemony: Schwarzmantel, J. (2015), *Gramsci's Prison Notebooks*, London: Routledge.

22 Anderson, P. (2009), 'The New Old World', *New York: Verso*, p.447; Kandil (2016), *op.cit.* Their growing presence in the police and judiciary was largely a result of efforts by the Gülenist movement.

23 These periods serve mostly to organise data and structure thinking. Obviously, AKP politics and policies did not change overnight in 2010 or 2015, so in that sense the periods are somewhat artificial.

produced a largely ‘status quo’ foreign policy, which contained many previous aspects and was mostly predictable. In the following periods, after overcoming key consolidation challenges – mostly related to the Turkish military – the AKP grew more confident. Yet, it also faced serious new domestic challenges from the Gülenist movement and the Kurds, while at the same time becoming more and more a vehicle dominated by one man – Erdoğan. This resulted in a more issue-specific, sometimes revisionist, foreign policy with less connective tissue and hence less predictability – but more scope for abrupt turnabouts. It included both strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood and armed Sunni groups throughout the Middle East, as well as a harsh anti-Kurdish dimension after 2015.

Figure 1 Push and pull factors influencing AKP politics and policies between 2002 and 2018



Towards domestic hegemony: Push and pull factors

On the push side, there was first the lingering conflict between the AKP's Islamist vision for Turkish society and firmly entrenched secular notions of 'Kemalism' (modernization, secularism and Westernisation) – supported by the deep state.²⁴ This conflict became more intense after 2007, in large part due to the party's growing power.²⁵ It was progressively settled in favour of the AKP and its ally at the time – the Gülenist movement – by deploying a mix of nationalist-conservative rhetoric, astute use of those parts of the state machinery the AKP/Gülenist movement controlled, political shows of strength, and judicial recourse or intimidation. Two key examples are the judicial proceedings against the Turkish military's top brass – the Ergenekon trial (2008–2013) and the Sledgehammer trial (2010–2015) – which significantly reduced the military's ability to supervise and intervene in the country's politics. Irrespective of the judicial merits and demerits of these proceedings, it is vital to see them as political turning points in the process of Turkish state formation – away from the military and towards greater representative as well as populist politics.²⁶ More or less in parallel, the AKP *et al.* also managed to gradually neutralise and then capture the Turkish judiciary as the last secular bulwark of the Kemalist state.²⁷ As far as push factors go, this development ensured that the AKP came to dominate the strategic heights of the Turkish state as the pre-eminent political party by about 2010/11. In terms of foreign policy, an effect of this push factor was that it created more space for the AKP to pursue its own preferences, with less influence from the Turkish military.

However, without the support of the Gülenist movement, AKP may never have achieved such dominance (see Box 1).²⁸ It was their partnership that proved essential in simultaneously achieving representative political power through the ballot box (playing to AKP strengths) and penetrating the institutions of the Turkish state through recruitment and promotion (playing to Gülenist strengths). It was this core alliance that slowly unravelled from about 2010 onwards, providing another push factor. In fact, the

24 The 'deep state' refers to powerful parts of the state bureaucracy, nearly always including the security and intelligence services, that dominate much decision and policy making on the basis of their loyalty to the status quo and that do not necessarily obey the elected political leadership supposedly in charge of governing the state if it is seen to want to bring more radical change about.

25 Mandaville (2014), *op.cit.*

26 The ambiguity of the Sledgehammer proceedings was well expressed in *The Guardian* (2012), online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/25/turkey-sledgehammer-coup-trial-verdict>; also: Aydıntaşbas (2016), *op.cit.*

27 Taş, H. (2017), 'A history of Turkey's AKP-Gülen conflict', *Mediterranean Politics*, online (paywall).

28 The term 'Gülenist movement' is used here for easy recognition, but it should be noted that the group calls itself a 'service movement' (*hizmet hareketi*), while the Turkish government dubs it a 'parallel state structure' (*paralel devlet yapılanması*) in its political discourse and a 'FETO' (Fethullahist terrorist organisation or Fethullahçı terör örgütü) in its legal indictments.

AKP-Gülenist victory over the Kemalist secular state fast-tracked the re-emergence of their differences, which have their basis in the different types of organisation they are. Whereas the AKP is a national political party with governing responsibilities and overt international Islamic ambitions based on a mix of Turkey's Ottoman past and a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired ideology, the Gülenists are a transnational, moderate Islamist movement with global educational, financial and media networks that exercise covert influence based on a low political profile.

Hence, the AKP's more statist approach after 2007, its centralisation of power without wishing to share it, its growing criticism of the EU, and its more vocal foreign policy were anathema to the Gülenist movement. The AKP's overtures to Turkey's Kurds added another rift in view of the preference of the Gülenist movement for Kurdish assimilation over Kurdish autonomy.²⁹ A protracted clash ensued in which the AKP gained the upper hand without, however, achieving complete victory yet.³⁰ As far as push factors go, this development ensured that between 2010 and 2018 the AKP and Gülenist movement duopoly over the Turkish state gradually turned into a monopoly. In terms of foreign policy, an effect of this push factor was that it created scope for pursuing a more narrowly-constructed national interest approach as the transnational interests of the Gülenist movement had previously made this more difficult.

Box 1 The Gülenist movement

The Gülen movement grew into Turkey's largest and most effective religion-based social movement in the 1980s and 1990s by staying out of politics and providing essential services to large groups of Turks through its social, financial, media and educational networks. While it tapped a similar groundswell of initial support as the AKP – conservative and rural Islam – its ideological worldview emphasised religious tolerance, education and social mobility while opposing the use of Islam for political purposes.

29 Taş (2017), *op.cit.*; El-Kazaz, S. (2015), *The AKP and the Gülen: The end of an historic alliance*, Massachusetts: Brandeis University, Middle East brief no. 95.

30 Tol, G. (2014), *The Clash of Former Allies: The AKP versus the Gulen Movement*, online: <http://www.mei.edu/content/clash-former-allies-akp-versus-gulen-movement>; El-Kazaz (2015), *op.cit.*; Jenkins, G. (2014), *Falling Facades: The Gülen Movement and Turkey's Escalating Power Struggle*, online: <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/81-falling-facades-the-g%C3%BClen-movement-and-turkeys-escalating-power-struggle.html>; Aydıntaşbaş, A. (2016), *The good, the bad and the Gülenists*, ECFR, online: http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_good_the_bad_and_the_gulenists7131 (all accessed 8 April 2018).

While the AKP pursued a strategy of direct political contestation and the Gülenist movement one of grassroots-based socio-religious activism, these fundamentally different approaches proved both highly complementary and very effective in their joint struggle with the military-dominated Kemalist state. Once their common objective had been realised, tensions between the AKP and Gülenist movement grew in 2010/11 (e.g. the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 and the Oslo leaks in 2011), escalating into a naked fight for power over the direction of the Turkish state that continues today. Examples of AKP-Gülenist clashes in the active phase of this struggle include:

- The 2012 arrest of Hakan Fidan (head of Turkish national intelligence) by Turkish (allegedly Gülenist) police. Mr. Fidan was engaged in Turkish-Kurdish peace negotiations at the time and the objective of the arrest appears to have been to foil the talks.
- The 2013/14 Gülenist-inspired police probe into Reza Zarrab, a Turkish-Iranian businessman suspected of secretly smuggling gold for oil from Turkey to Iran (under international sanctions) with the help of Turkish state-owned Halkbank. The probe led to the detention of the sons of three AKP Cabinet Members, the CEO of Halkbank and a number of construction tycoons. It also triggered prosecution in US courts.
- The dismissal and/or relocation of c. 40,000 civil servants, judges and police officers in 2013/14 – on orders of Prime Minister Erdoğan – that were involved in the Zarrab-investigation and on the allegation that they were part of a Gülenist parallel state.
- The 2014 AKP-sponsored legislation to close the educational network of private schools in Turkey that were dominated by the Gülenist movement and from which it derived substantial revenue, recruits and influence.

Source: Tol (2014), *op.cit.*; El-Kazaz (2015), *op.cit.*; Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*; Taş (2017), *op.cit.*; [The Guardian](#) (accessed 12 April 2018).

On the pull side, there was the AKP's Muslim Brotherhood-inspired majoritarian understanding of democracy that is more inclined to equate democratic practice with ruthless party-political competition leading to a winner-takes-all result, rather than a system of governance underpinned by the rule of law, basic human rights, a free press and a level playing field for political competition. Against this background simmers the unresolved tension between Islam and democracy in the sense that Islam as a religion has clear political interests and aspirations as to how society should be governed which are at odds with some of the outcomes a democracy can produce.³¹ Although the AKP

31 Wickham, C. (2013), *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist movement*, Princeton: PUP.

was founded as a conservative democratic party, it has been incrementally promoting Islamist practices in everyday life and this has gradually seeped through its internal and external policies – especially after the party consolidated its position in 2007.³² Western countries have tended to attribute the AKP's authoritarian practices mostly to Islamist ideology from the perspective that the politicisation of Islam is 'inherently incompatible with much of the Western world'.³³ In terms of foreign policy, an effect of this pull factor was a greater focus on the Middle East, greater hostility towards Israel (although the economic relationship was never truly disrupted) and growing antagonism towards the EU.

The 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul were illustrative of the AKP's understanding of majoritarian rule. After the government authorised the construction of a shopping mall resembling Ottoman-era barracks, social unrest and demonstrations erupted and lasted for 15 long days. These were suppressed in a heavy-handed fashion and protestors were painted as criminals, provocateurs and traitors.³⁴ The mall was ultimately not built, but it did put the AKP's intolerance for dissent, discussion and compromise on full display.

Also on the pull side was the extensive tacit legacy of authoritarianism and nationalism that permeates the Turkish state. While this topic has not benefited from extensive research, decades of suppression of political manifestations of religion and anti-Western sentiments through illiberal democratic rule have left a legacy in the form of a strong central state and a nationalist-authoritarian discourse that provided the mould into which the AKP stepped and that proved too inviting and too compelling to discontinue. In fact, the AKP has been quick to recognise the usefulness of past nationalist and authoritarian practices as effective ways to maintain popular and political support, either by using them to suppress dissent or to frame itself as defender of the nation.³⁵ President Erdoğan used the latter tactic to good effect on 18 March 2018 by turning the defeat of the British and French navies against the Ottoman Empire in the straits of Çanakkale into a national celebration of Turkish military heroism on a par with the recent 'liberation' of Afrin.³⁶ Moreover, one could argue that the AKP has taken this legacy of authoritarianism to new heights by enshrining an executive presidency into

32 Rabasa, Angel and F.Stephen Larrabee, (2008), *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation

33 Roy, O. (1998), *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge: HUP.

34 For example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey> (accessed 8 April 2018).

35 Nationalism and authoritarianism make agreeable bedfellows because a nationalist worldview emphasises threats to the all-important national identity, which then often require decisive and centralised counter-action to 'save the nation'. See for instance: Wolf, N. (2007), *The end of America: Letter of warning to a young patriot*, White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing.

36 Göksel, N. (2018), *Turkey's siege mentality*, Istanbul: ICG.

the Turkish constitution. In terms of foreign policy, an effect of this pull factor has been to enable an almost regal approach – dominated by President Erdoğan – with mercurial edges. In addition, this pull factor enabled a renewed emphasis on the use of military assets in Turkish foreign policy, especially in northern Syria and northern Iraq, but also by constructing a Turkish military base in Qatar and in the form of purchase(s) of advanced Russian weapon systems.

The 2015 electoral calculus and the Kurdish issue

The June 2015 general elections cost the AKP 9 per cent of its electoral support as well as its absolute majority in Parliament. The party lost most seats to parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum: to the left-wing *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (HDP, mostly Kurdish-oriented) on the one hand, and to the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP, ultra-nationalist) on the other.³⁷ This development can be understood in part through the AKP's rift with the Gülenist movement, which eroded its core support base; in part through the collapse of the AKP's formal peace negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) between 2006 and 2011 ('the Oslo talks') and the inherent electoral contradiction of the peace process; and in part through other factors such as the declining space for civic/political activism.³⁸ The ultra-nationalists naturally opposed peace negotiations, while the Kurds had high expectations of constitutional reform that the Turkish government could not meet. Although the levels of violence between the Turkish armed forces and PKK were negligible between 2013 and 2015, it rapidly became evident that the AKP was unable to deliver the liberal and autonomous solution the Kurds envisaged.³⁹ When the Turkish government also refrained from helping the Kurds in Iraq and Syria during their fight against Islamic State (IS), Turkey's Kurds turned away from the AKP. Meanwhile, the HDP entered Parliament with 12.5 per cent of the vote.

As the combination of the 'Gülenist rift' and the HDP's electoral success threatened both AKP party political dominance and Prime Minister's Erdoğan's plans for an executive presidency, AKP discourse and tactics shifted rapidly. The peace process

37 Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*

38 El-Kazaz (2015), *op.cit.*; Kandil (2016), *op.cit.* It could even be argued that the AKP's rift with the Gülenist movement lies at the basis of the AKP's more aggressive approach towards Turkey's Kurds as it was the movement that exposed the AKP-PKK negotiations that took place between 2006-2011. There had been informal conversations between the Turkish government and the PKK prior to 2006, but the 2006-2011 negotiations were both formal in the sense of directly involving senior officials on both sides, and direct. See: Kadioglu, I. (2018), 'The Oslo Talks: Revealing the Turkish government's secret negotiations with the PKK', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, online (paywall, accessed 5 July 2018).

39 Hakyemez, S. (2017), 'Turkey's Failed Peace Process with the Kurds: A Different Explanation', *Middle East Brief*, No.3.

ended with a securitised narrative about national union and with hard-line measures aimed at regaining the right-wing vote.⁴⁰ Fighting even resumed inside major Turkish-Kurdish cities, which was followed by the arrest of many HDP politicians on charges of incitement of terrorism.⁴¹ It was largely through such shifts that the AKP managed to regain its parliamentary majority in November 2015. Since then, the AKP leadership has persisted in its anti-Kurdish rhetoric, which culminated in its invasion of Afrin (Syria).⁴²

The coup attempt by elements of the Turkish military in July 2016 can be regarded as the proverbial crossroads where many of the developments discussed above intersected. Blamed on both the Gülenist movement and the military, it allowed the AKP to make the case for a further centralisation of the Turkish state – naturally with itself in charge – based on a strong nationalist-religious-conservative ideology and the person of President Erdoğan. He himself defined the coup attempt as a ‘gift from the God’ to pacify or punish those parts of society not (yet) loyal to the AKP.⁴³ With this aim in mind, the government declared a state of emergency and suspended the European Convention of Human Rights to enable a massive crackdown on the Gülenist movement, social democrats, Kemalists, Kurds and ‘Atlanticists’ alike.⁴⁴ Nearly 160,000 people were arrested and 152,000 civil servants dismissed.⁴⁵ The 2017 referendum that turned Turkey from a parliamentary into a presidential system represents the institutional conclusion of this process for now.⁴⁶

On balance, this analysis supports the view that the AKP has led Turkish society from a liberal and market-oriented beginning – with aspirations to be regional peacemaker and regional economic soft power – into a more nationalist, conservative and illiberal period under a mix of internal pressures (e.g. its fight with the Kemalist state and its split with the Gülenist movement) and opportunities (e.g. its 2007 and 2015 electoral victories, the 2016 coup d’état, and the undiminished popularity of President Erdoğan).

40 Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*

41 See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/04/turkey-arrests-pro-kurdish-party-leaders-mps> or <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/arrest-of-hdp-deputies-necessary-appropriate-turkey-tells-echr-124140> (both accessed 9 April 2018).

42 The no-holds-barred framing of the PKK and YPG as terrorist organisations in a recent Foreign Policy article by Mevlut Cavusoglu is a telling indicator of the 360-degree change in the AKP’s approach of Turkey’s Kurdish question. Cavusoglu, M. (2018), *The meaning of operation olive branch*, online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/05/the-meaning-of-operation-olive-branch/> (accessed 9 April 2018).

43 See this public speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrSomYhjtyY> (accessed 20 March 2018).

44 Gurcan, M. and M. Giscon (2016), *What is The Turkish Military’s Strategic Identity After July 2015*, Istanbul: Istanbul Policy Center; Aydtintasbas (2016), *op.cit.*

45 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018), *Report on the impact of the State of Emergency on Human Rights in Turkey, Including an Update on South-East*, Geneva: UNHCHR.

46 Akyol, M. (2015), ‘Is Erdoğanism a Threat to Turkey’s Islamism’, Online: <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/31/is-erdoganism-a-threat-to-turkeys-islamism> (accessed 6 March 2018).

2 How domestic politics reverberated in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East

For the first decade of the 21st century, Turkey's foreign policy was largely based on the catchphrase 'zero problems with our neighbours'. Leveraging cultural and historical ties with states that used to be part of the Ottoman Empire, the AKP established close relations with the authoritarian regimes of most Middle Eastern countries to increase its exports and expand its economic influence.⁴⁷ This stimulated the Turkish economy and helps explain its consistent growth for most of the 2000s. In making a shift from 'Kemalist isolationism' to 'neo-Ottoman engagement',⁴⁸ Turkey also increasingly offered its services as broker to mediate regional conflicts (e.g. Israel/Palestine).⁴⁹

Box 2 The various meanings of 'neo-Ottomanism'

The term 'neo-Ottomanism' is occasionally used in relation to Turkish foreign policy, often with reference to Turkish imperial designs on the Levant or the re-establishment of a Turkish sphere of influence in the region. In line with the work of Yavuz (2016), it is useful to differentiate three versions of neo-Ottomanism:

- Its civic and legal meaning during the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century that conferred citizenship and certain rights irrespective of ethnicity or religion to all its inhabitants in a bid to secure the loyalties of its heterogeneous population. It can be understood as a kind of imperial nationalism predicated on notions of tolerance and cosmopolitanism
- A pragmatic notion of identity of the early 1990s, championed by President Özal, which sought to neutralise the Turkish-Kurdish stand-off by appealing to a higher, shared identity on the one hand and to project soft power throughout the Levant on the basis of shared Islamism and co-existence of the past on the other

47 Barkey, H. (2011), 'Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East', *Ceri Strategy Papers*, No. 10.

48 Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*

49 Barkey (2011), *op.cit.*

- A vehicle for power projection in recent years, championed by President Erdoğan, based on the worldly and religious supremacy of the Ottoman sultans as autocratic rulers and defenders of the faith against Western intrusion and other foreign threats.

In short, it is important to be clear which version of neo-Ottomanism is being referred to. It is interesting to note that the shared identity and civic notions embedded in the first and second versions of neo-Ottomanism have largely been suppressed in modern Turkey itself as they ran counter to the establishment of the homogeneous, narrowly-defined nationalist state that Kemal Atatürk envisaged – despite the country's ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.

Source: Yavuz, M. (2016), 'Social and intellectual origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a post-national vision', *Die Welt des Islams*, 56, pp. 438-465; Jabbour (2011), *op.cit.*; Imber, C.(2002), *The Ottoman Empire*, London: Palgrave McMillan

However, the events of the Arab Spring in 2011 provided the perfect outlet for the nationalist, religious and conservative upsurge of AKP domestic politics against the backdrop of the cracks in its relationship with the Gülenist movement. Moreover, as successive revolutions swept away the regimes that the AKP had established close (economic) relationships with, opportunities for influence coincided with the need to reconfigure Turkish foreign policy. The AKP's close ideological proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood proved crucial in shaping this reconfiguration as it provided both the network and revolutionary ideology of a moderate and democratic Islam that could ride the waves of popular protest to reshape the regional power balance in Turkey's favor.⁵⁰ The participation of Muhammed Morsi of Egypt and Khaled Mashal of Hamas in the 2012 AKP party congress provides a good indicator of close cooperation between the AKP and Muslim Brotherhood-inspired outfits across the Middle East.⁵¹ It should have come as no surprise that Turkey significantly increased its support for such groups after the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria.⁵²

The AKP subsequently saw the emergence of Muslim Brotherhood regimes in Tunisia and Egypt as vindication of its approach and this probably encouraged its early and

50 Kandil (2016), *op.cit.*

51 Aydın, S. (2014), 'The Seesaw Friendship Between Turkey's AKP and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood', *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, online: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/24/seesaw-friendship-between-turkey-s-akp-and-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-pub-56243> (accessed 3 March 2018)

52 Lynch, M. (2016), *The new Arab wars: Uprisings and anarchy in the Middle East*, New York: Public Affairs.

uncompromising stance against President Assad in the Syrian civil war.⁵³ The feeling of riding the crest of a wave of ideological renewal and power did not last long, however. Tunisia's Ennahda movement had to step back and compromise, a coup d'état in Egypt ended President Morsi's rule and, with Iranian help, President Assad stuck it out. Notably, this episode of extended and overt support for the Muslim Brotherhood across several countries in the Middle East and North Africa gradually aligned Turkey with Qatar (the Brotherhood's other state supporter) and, after the 2017 'Qatar crisis', indirectly with Iran – but against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁵⁴ This represents a clear break with the preceding period in which Turkey sought to build good relations across the entire region.

Increasingly trapped in the sectarian and ideological constraints of its own foreign policy, the AKP entered a rough domestic period that was characterised by its escalating rift with the Gülenists (starting in earnest around 2012), the Gezi Park protests (2013), an attempted coup (2016) and the presidential referendum (2017). In part in consequence, AKP foreign policy took a radically nationalist turn to shore up its domestic nationalist-conservative power base. In particular, the AKP pursued a stark anti-Kurdish foreign policy after 2015. Of course, external circumstances – such as the speed with which the Syrian Kurds became a key US-ally in the fight against IS – also played a role.⁵⁵

In short, Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East has evolved from acquiring regional influence and status by promoting economic relations with its neighbours (until about 2010) to supporting Sunni-oriented and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated sectarian groups between 2011 and 2015 before taking a more 'defensive' anti-Kurdish turn after 2015. Insofar as a new marker can be discerned to guide Turkish foreign policy amid these changes, it is perhaps the notion of Eurasianism. While there are several understandings of this concept,⁵⁶ here it refers to the pragmatic use of the term by the Turkish political leadership to signal greater attention to Turkey's Eastern neighbours

53 Tezcür (2016), *op.cit.*

54 Lynch (2016), *op.cit.*

55 An interesting twist in Turkish foreign policy towards Europe is that it features increasingly hostile rhetoric without creating major practical ruptures. For example, President Erdoğan has been firm in blaming Western countries – the US in particular – for aiding and abetting the 2016 attempted coup and (Kurdish) terrorism. He also publicly accused the German and Dutch governments of authoritarian behaviour towards his supporters in their countries. European objections against Turkey's large-scale violations of human rights in the wake of the attempted coup triggered further accusations and saw a rapid deterioration in relations. Despite this turmoil, the EU-Turkey refugee deal still stands, negotiations about a revamped trade agreement limp on, and Turkey remains a member of NATO.

56 See for example: Tarisever, O., 'Discourses and policies of Euransianism in Turkey during the 2000s', in: Talbot, V. (2018), *Turkey: Towards a Eurasian shift?*, Milan: ISPI; Dugin, Alexander (2009) 'The Eurasian Idea', online: <https://www.counter-currents.com/2013/11/the-eurasian-idea/> (accessed 10 February 2018)

in the country's foreign policy – extending to Russia and even China – as a way of balancing or undermining Western expectations. For now, it appears to be largely a notion of convenience but, if seriously pursued, it could in time create a new north-south type division that splits the Middle East.

Turkey's three phases of foreign policy towards the Middle East between 2002 and 2018 are summarised in Figure 2 below. In this analysis, they have been heavily influenced by the internal dynamics of domestic Turkish politics and largely served the consolidation of AKP rule and its control over the Turkish state (also reflected in Figure 2). Based on the preceding discussion, key dynamics and linkages can be articulated as follows:

- While engaged in its contestation with the Turkish military, it served the AKP/Gülenist movement well to continue a status quo-oriented and soft power foreign policy that remained geared towards EU accession on the one hand and towards establishing networks of economic cooperation and influence throughout the Middle East on the other. This approach had the advantage of neither alarming their European partners nor the military while the AKP/Gülenist movement strengthened their domestic power bases to obtain control over the Turkish state (albeit, it should be noted, with different views on what the state should look like and should be doing). Yet, while an economic and soft power-oriented foreign policy served the transnational interests of the Gülenist movement rather well, it left little scope for the AKP's more expansive and Islamist convictions and tendencies.
- Once the AKP and Gülenist movement had accomplished their initial objective (around 2010–2012) and had also established an absolute parliamentary majority in the process (2007), they could initiate a more assertive and more active foreign policy. AKP control over the top level of the executive – including the council of ministers and parliament – put it in an especially favourable place to pursue its principles and views. The emerging cracks in the alliance between the AKP and the Gülenist movement presumably also led the AKP to attach less weight to its partner's interests – a process that accelerated significantly in 2011/12. This makes it realistic to suggest that when the Arab Spring broke in 2011, the AKP was ready and able to enact a more aggressive foreign policy. Because of its own networks and convictions, its ambition was largely funnelled through Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups. While this logic did not necessarily determine Turkish foreign policy choices in individual cases, the argument here is that the AKP could confidently and ambitiously engage in the Arab Spring because it had just consolidated its power and party-political base.
- Finally, the contestation between the AKP and the Gülenist movement over control of the Turkish state proved to be 'take 2' of the 21st century chapter of Turkish state-building ('take 1' being the AKP/Gülenist clash with the Turkish military). It shook the AKP to the core and arguably left its more assertive regional foreign policy bereft of

key impulses at essential moments as it sought to deal with the threat the Gülenist movement posed to its rule between 2012 and 2016/17. The collateral damage of the AKP-Gülenist clash included Turkey's and Syria's Kurds. More specifically, the AKP used Turkey's and Syria's Kurds as the 'enemy' to win the electoral battle of 2015 as well as the ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of Turkey's national-religious conservatives (including quite some Kurds). This proved an easy strategy to execute as the AKP could fall back on the longstanding political and mental frame of the Turkish state of defining the Kurdish problem as one of terrorism that requires a militarised response.⁵⁷

The main conclusions of these linkages and dynamics are threefold. First, the effectiveness of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East has become debatable. By replacing a foreign policy oriented towards mutual economic benefits and co-existence with a more revisionist one, Turkey 'sacrificed' many of the networks, credits and benefits it had accumulated under its 'zero problems with our neighbours' approach. Subsequently, the groups that Turkey promoted to shape the political order of the 'New Middle East' did not ultimately manage to establish a power base anywhere akin to the AKP's position in Turkey. This failure cannot be ascribed to Turkish foreign policy, but it suggests a fundamental error of assessment of the underlying forces of change and continuity.

Second, the level of ambition of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East decreased markedly between 2015 and 2018. From a broad and unthreatening policy of economic cooperation, Turkish foreign policy transformed into a more assertive and equally broad policy of stimulating regime change for a few short years, mostly by supporting Muslim Brotherhood-related and armed Sunni groups. Its foreign policy ended up being heavily centred on a single issue, namely containment of the region's Kurds. But the estrangement that the previous phase of Sunni-sectarian-cum-Muslim-Brotherhood Turkish foreign policy had brought about with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the US was not adequately compensated by Turkey's newly built alliance of convenience with Iran and Russia over Syria, and this constrained Turkey's options for dealing with the Kurds. Third, the level of predictability of Turkish foreign policy decreased over time, with power being gradually centralised in the hands of President Erdoğan.

This is evidently not a complete picture of all that transpired between 2002 and 2018 – some will undoubtedly find it reductionist – but it has good explanatory power in terms of linking major foreign policy shifts back to key domestic political developments within Turkey. The second part of the report develops greater support for the argument by taking a closer look at Turkish foreign policy in three particular exhibits, namely Syria, Iraq and Turkey's relationship with Iran/Saudi Arabia.

57 Kadioglu, I. (2018), *op.cit.*

Figure 2 Turkish domestic political developments in relation to its foreign policy in the Middle East

| | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | |
|--------------------------|---|------|------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|------|-------------------------|--|----------------------------|--|---|----------------------------|--|---------------------------|--|-------------------|--|
| Domestic politics | Pro-market, pragmatic and inclusive nationalism | | | | | | | | Growing authoritarianism, religious-conservatism and nationalism | | | Entrenched nationalism and illiberalism with a pronounced confrontational slant | | | | | | |
| Elections | Elections: AKP majority | | | | | Elections: AKP absolute majority | | | | | | Gezi park protests | | Two elections: AKP majority (June) and absolute majority (November) | | Referendum on constitutional change (including executive presidency) | | Elections: AKP absolute majority |
| Military | | | | Start EU accession talks | | | | Start Ergenekon process | | Start Sledgehammer process | | | | | | Coup d'état | | Purges (linked with Gülenist movement) |
| Gülenist movement | | | | | | | | | Initial tensions | | | Contestation and clashes AKP and Gülenist movement | | | | | | AKP victorious |
| Kurds | | | | | Oslo negotiations with the PKK | | | | | Oslo leaks | | Collapse Kurdish peace process | | Renewed domestic Kurdish suppression and violent attacks by Kurdish groups | | | | |
| Foreign policy | 'Regional economic cooperation' | | | | | | | | | | 'Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Sunni sectarianism' | | | | 'Anti-Kurdish militarism' | | | |
| General | Significant investment in the Gulf and Levant | | | | | | | | | Arab Spring | | | Authoritarian retrenchment | | | | Qatar crisis | |
| Kurds | | | | | | | | | | | | Battle for Kobane | | Rise of the PYD | Euphrates shield | Turkish Idlib campaign | Invasion of Afrin | |
| Syria | | | | | | | | | | | Support for groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham | | | IS terrorist attacks in Turkey, Russian intervention | | IS terrorist attacks in Turkey | Creation of SDF | Manbij deal with US |
| Iraq | Growing trade, economic cooperation and investment with Iraqi Kurdistan | | | | | | | | | | | IS advance | | | | Referendum on KRG independence | | |

Exhibit 1: Turkish foreign policy towards Syria

The AKP established close relations with Assad's Syria between 2002 and 2011 by eliminating visa requirements, increasing trade and holding joint cabinet meetings.⁵⁸ Despite close relations, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan did not conceal his sympathy for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) and even asked President Assad to legalise the movement (its leaders were in political exile in Turkey).⁵⁹ When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu, called on President Assad to enact structural political reform, including integration of the SMB into Syrian politics. His efforts were entirely in line with Turkey's broader pro-Muslim Brotherhood strategy in response to the Arab Spring, which was in turn enabled by the AKP's own religious/ideological background, its transnational roots, and the scope that opened domestically for a more assertive foreign policy.

When President Assad declined the Turkish proposal, Ankara took a hard line and sought to overthrow his regime through a mix of international isolation at the diplomatic level and providing operational backing for the SMB and other Syrian opposition groups.⁶⁰ In 2011 and 2012, Turkey hosted several meetings to stimulate and facilitate the emergence of a Syrian opposition front in Istanbul and Antalya, namely the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and its armed wing, the Free Syrian Army (FSA). While the SNC brought opposition groups of different political hues together (including SMB supporters), most of them shared a Sunni socio-religious background.⁶¹ This enabled Turkey to pursue its interests along Sunni identity lines, grounded in its own Muslim Brotherhood antecedents.

A key problem of the early Western-Turkish-Gulf strategy in arming the Syrian opposition was that Western countries sought to make a clear cut between moderate FSA groups and more religiously oriented Sunni groups – supporting the former, but not the latter. In contrast, neither Turkey nor Gulf countries attached much importance to this distinction. In addition, even in the early days, differences between moderate and more radical groups, as well as between more secular and more religious groups were far from clear cut and intermingling had already started to occur. For example, about a dozen more religiously oriented rebel groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, regularly worked with FSA groups in 2012/13 without accepting the authority of the FSA's Supreme Military Council. Although the US and Turkey were united in their covert effort to arm and equip more moderate FSA groups against President Assad's regime, US officials especially warned

58 Barkey (2011), *op.cit.*

59 Gurpinar, B. (2015), 'Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood: Crossing Roads in Syria', *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(4).

60 Ülgen, S. (2014), 'Turkey's Uphill Battle in Syria', *Carnegie Europe*, online: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2014/06/09/turkey-s-uphill-battle-in-syria/hd7f> (accessed 8 March 2018).

61 Balci, B. (2012), 'Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, online: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/13/turkey-s-relations-with-syrian-opposition-pub-47841> (accessed 6 March 2018).

Turkey against weapon deliveries to extremist groups in October 2012.⁶² Despite occasional official Turkish assurances, it appears that Ankara continued to arm both moderate and more religiously oriented Sunni groups, sometimes under the guise of the SNC/FSA and at other times beneath the radar. A few incidents and developments provide suggestive evidence for this assessment:

- Turkey continued to support more radical groups via the SNC until at least September 2013, well after the initial US warning that in its view greater care should be taken in vetting FSA groups for support.⁶³
- A truck loaded with weapons was stopped in Hatay in January 2014. Although the Turkish government insisted that the truck carried humanitarian assistance for Syrian Turkmens, initial reports indicated that the truck was headed to Kilis, which is close to areas that were at that time held by jihadi's.⁶⁴
- Roughly a month later, Turkish gendarmerie stopped a convoy of trucks that turned out to belong to the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT). The convoy was loaded with arms and on its way to the Reyhanli border crossing. At the time, the crossing was under the control of JAN.⁶⁵ Subsequent investigations indicate that the cargo was probably intended for JAN, Ansar al-Sham or other extremist groups.⁶⁶
- While the US branded JAN a terrorist organisation in December 2012, Turkey only followed suit in June 2014.⁶⁷
- Turkey only started to take control of its border with Syria more seriously after the abduction of its consular staff in Mosul (2014), the first IS attacks on Turkish soil (2015) and the rise of the YPG after its victory at Kobane (2015). This allowed thousands of jihadists to travel from Turkey into Syria under the pretext of providing humanitarian aid between 2011 and 2015.⁶⁸

62 Sanger, D. (2012), 'Rebel Arms Flow is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria', *The New York Times*, October 14, online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html> (accessed 10 March 2018).

63 Lister, C. (2013), 'Syria's Insurgent Landscape,' *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, IHS Jane's.

64 CNN Türk (2014), 'Hatay'da Mühimmat yüklü Tır Şoku' (Weapon-Loaded Truck Shock in Hatay), *Cnn Türk* online: <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/hatayda-muhimmat-yuklu-tir-soku> (accessed 10 March 2018).

65 Gurcan, M., 'MIT gun truck bust lands Turkish gendarmes in prison', *Al-Monitor*, 20 April 2015, online: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/turkey-scapegoating-upsets-gendarmerie-shipping-weapons.html> (accessed 14 April 2018).

66 See: http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/11/151127_mit_tirlari_neler_olmustu or http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/213863/TIR_daki_sir_aydinlandi.html (14 April 2018).

67 Jones, D. (2014), 'Turkey designates Al-Nusra Front as a Terrorist Organisation', *Voice of America*, June 4, online: <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-designates-al-nusra-front-as-a-terrorist-organization/1929675.html> (accessed 10 March 2018).

68 Tahiroglu, M. and J. Schanzer (2017), *Islamic State Networks in Turkey*, FDD Press, Washington; Rasmussen, N. (2015), 'Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Home-grown Terror', 114th Congress Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security, online: <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM00/20150211/102901/HHRG-114-HM00-Wstate-RasmussenN-20150211.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2018).

The growing dominance of IS in 2013 was not initially seen as a problem by Turkey, but it did create a further rift in the international approach to the Syrian civil war. Turkey's top priority remained the overthrow of the regime of President Assad. Given the difficulty of engaging in a direct military intervention, its main tool to this effect was the somewhat motley assortment of FSA and more extremist armed groups.⁶⁹ However, the focus of the US and most European countries shifted to defeating IS and they came to see militant radical Sunni groups in an even more negative light than before. This ensured Ankara's policy towards the Syrian civil war remained trapped between the conflicting requirements of maintaining good relations with the US (necessitating a strong stance against IS), encouraging the overthrow of President Assad (in which endeavor IS was a helpful, latent ally) and preventing the Kurds in Turkey and Syria from becoming too powerful or teaming up (the battles of IS with Syria's Kurds were also helpful in this regard).⁷⁰ Turkey consistently prioritised the second and third objective.

In fact, Ankara only started to see IS as a serious threat towards the middle of 2014, when the group abducted (and later released) dozens of Turkey's consular staff from its Mosul Consulate.⁷¹ This incident played a significant role in convincing Turkey to join the US-led coalition against IS, although Turkey's anti-IS efforts remained somewhat half-hearted. For example, although it agreed to stop the flow of foreign terrorist fighters as part of the Coalition's strategy against IS,⁷² Turkey's claims of having put effective border controls in place continued to ring hollow as evidence kept surfacing that people, lethal military equipment, funds/resources and bomb-making materials continued to cross

69 This was mostly due to public reticence towards military intervention, the discredited state of the Turkish military after the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials, and the security concerns of engaging in a bilateral intervention. See: Cagaptay, S. (2013), 'Why Turkey won't Attack Syria', *The Atlantic*, online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/why-turkey-wont-attack-syria/274806/> (accessed 30 May 2018).

70 Candar, C. (2014), 'Savaş tezkeresi: ama kime karşı?' *Radikal*, online: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/cengiz-candar/savas-tezkeresi-ama-kime-karsi-1215889/> (accessed 1 June 2018)

71 Özdemir, C. (2014), 'Is Turkey serious about joining the anti-IS coalition?', *Middle East Eye*, online: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-serious-about-joining-anti-coalition-2042678126> (accessed 30 May 2018).

72 McInnis, J. Kathleen (2016), 'Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State', *Congressional Research Service*, 7-5700, p.1.

the Turkish border into then-IS strongholds.⁷³ Presumably, Turkey maintained its under-the-radar 'supply policy' towards the Syrian conflict, including engagement with more extremist groups, because it killed two birds with one stone: it strengthened anti-Assad forces and it disadvantaged the Syrian Kurds who were frequently engaged in battle with IS.

The result of this policy was a clear deterioration of Turkey's relationship with both the US and the Syrian (as well as Iraqi) Kurds as the combat assistance Turkey could have offered in the fight against IS did not materialise. Moreover, by not putting effective border controls in place until late in the day, Turkey frustrated its Western allies and arguably prolonged the fight against IS.

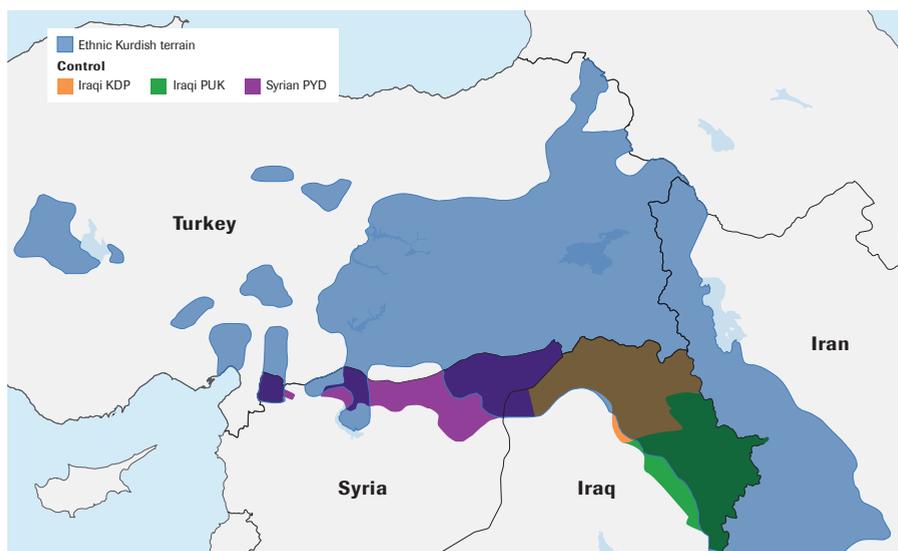
By 2014/15, the Syrian Kurds had emerged as the most effective force fighting IS. While the PYD's territorial gains induced anxiety in Ankara, it kept diplomatic channels open with the head of the PYD, Salih Muslim, who sought to reassure Turkey that the PYD's intention was to free the region from IS threat and not the establishment of an independent Syrian Kurdistan.⁷⁴ By mid-2015, the PYD's armed forces, the YPG, had managed to establish three autonomous, but non-contiguous, cantons in northern Syria (Afrin, Jazira and Kobani) during their fight with IS. This brought into being a Kurdish 'corridor' that extended about 400 kilometres westward from the border between Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (see Figure 3). Practically, PYD control over hundreds

73 For example, 90 per cent of foreign fighters supporting IS reportedly entered Syria through the Turkish border between 2013 and 2014. Stein, A. (2016), *Islamic State Networks in Turkey: Recruitment for the Caliphate*, The Atlantic Council, online: <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/islamic-state-networks-in-turkey/>. Turkey was also the most important source for components in the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by IS forces. CAR (2016), *Tracing the Supply of Components Used in Islamic State IEDs*, Conflict for Armament Research, online: <http://www.conflictarm.com/publications>; Hubbard, B. and K. Shoumali (2015), *Fertilizer, Also Suited for Bombs, Flows to ISIS Territory From Turkey*, *The New York Times*, 4 May online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/world/europe/fertilizer-also-suited-for-bombs-flows-to-isis-territory-from-turkey.html>. Finally, the Turkish government has been accused of supporting the IS oil trade by the main opposition parties (CHP and MHP). Yabancı, B. (2016), 'Is Turkey buying oil from the Islamic State?' *Research Turkey*, online: <http://researchturkey.org/is-turkey-buying-oil-from-the-islamic-state> (accessed 22 April 2018). Scholarly analysis suggests that IS-owned crude oil found its way to international markets via Turkey's Ceyhan terminal. Kiourktsoglou, G. and A. Coutroubis, 'ISIS Export Gateway to Global Crude Oil Markets', *University of Greenwich*, online: <http://www.allaboutshipping.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PAPER-on-CRUDE-OIL-and-ISIS.pdf> (accessed 22 April 2018). Lund provides a good case study on the normalcy of economic collusion and cooperation between sworn enemies in wartime Syria. Lund, A., (2018), *The factory: A glimpse into Syria's war economy*, New York/DC: The Century Foundation.

74 'PYD leader arrives in Turkey for two-day talks: Report', *Hürriyet Daily News*, online: <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/pyd-leader-arrives-in-turkey-for-two-day-talks-report-51439> (accessed 01 June 2018)

of kilometres of border fatally undermined Turkey’s efforts to establish safe zones within Syria as a buffer against regime forces, reduce Kurdish influence and keep Syrian refugees inside of their country.⁷⁵

Figure 3 Overview of Kurdish ethnic presence and/or political control in Syria, Iraq and Turkey



Source: *Middle East Eye; Institute for the Study of War.*

The development caused deep concerns among the Turkish political and military elite, as they considered the YPG a PKK-linked terrorist group which in the medium term could develop the region into an autonomous Kurdish state ('Rojava'). Memories of the 1980s, when the Syrian Ba'ath regime supported the PKK and allowed it to stage violent campaigns in Turkey from northern Syria, were quick to spring to mind.⁷⁶ Ankara's attitude became even more hostile when the PKK – disappointed by the clear failure of the peace process by mid-2015, inspired by the YPG's successes across the border, and more confident after the political revival of the Kurdish cause following the June 2015 elections in which the HDP won about 13 per cent of the vote – initiated its

75 Tastekin, F. (2016), *Rojava Kürtlerin Zamanı*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul; Sary, G. (2016), *Kurdish self-governance in Syria: Survival and ambition*, London: Chatham House.

76 Kasapoglu and Ulgen (2018a), *op.cit.*

'urban warfare' strategy in Turkey to achieve 'democratic autonomy'.⁷⁷ A vicious cycle of terrorist attacks and state terrorism ensued, which led to large-scale destruction and displacement in major cities in south-eastern Turkey. In this context, the Syrian Kurds were increasingly seen as a threat to national security and US assistance to the YPG as a source of major concern.⁷⁸

In a bid to counter the PYD/YPG, Turkey deployed a three-dimensional strategy, namely exploiting intra-Kurdish leadership rivalry (especially by using President Barzani of the KRG against the PYD leadership), using the FSA against YPG forces and – as a last resort – employing its own military forces.⁷⁹ The limited impact of the first two planks of Turkey's strategy soon became apparent when it launched three military operations in rapid succession.⁸⁰ These had the net effect of effectively containing the PYD/YPG along Turkey's southern borders:⁸¹

- In August 2016, a mix of Turkish and FSA troops took control of Jarablus and the Al-Bab border crossing (Operation Euphrates Shield). Turkish control over Al-Bab prevented the coalescence of the PYD cantons of Kobani and Afrin.⁸²
- In October 2017, Turkish forces created safe zones along Turkey's southern border that further blocked the completion of the 'Kurdish corridor'. Turkey also executed operations in and around Idlib as part of the Astana agreement to establish de-escalation zones. These allowed Turkey to surround the PYD-controlled Afrin canton from the south and prevent its expansion.
- In January 2018, Turkish and proxy forces initiated an offensive that wrested control over Afrin from the Kurds (Operation Olive Branch).⁸³

77 Dalay, G. (2015) 'Turkey's Kurdish issue: From peace to low intensity-war', *Al Jazeera* online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/12/turkey-kurdish-issue-peace-intensity-war-151221074921873.html> (accessed 31 May 2018).

78 'Turkish Foreign Minister: Kurdish YPG in Afrin are a direct security threat', *Al Jazeera*, online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2018/02/turkey-fm-kurdish-ypg-afrin-security-threat-180203090609761.html> (accessed 31 May 2018).

79 Taştekin, *op.cit.*

80 President Barzani sided with the Turkish government against the PYD leadership despite the foundation of the Kurdish High Council in 2012. Yet, the effects of this alliance of convenience were largely annulled by US support for YPG forces. The FSA, in turn, increasingly lost terrain and fighters to IS.

81 See: Kasapoglu and Ülgen (2018a; 2018b), *op.cit.*; *Al-Monitor* (2018), online: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-russia-iran-tripartite-syria-summit-outcome.html> (accessed 14 April 2018).

82 'Relations with Turkey-Syria, Turkey's Approach to Syrian Conflict', *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, available on <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-syria.en.mfa> (accessed 11 January 2018).

83 'Turkish General Staff Public Announcement', *Turkish General Staff website*, available on http://www.tsk.tr/BasinFaaliyetleri/BA_50 (accessed 24 January 2018)

An interesting ancillary effect of Turkey's increasingly anti-Kurdish foreign policy in Syria is that its success required improved relations with Russia given the latter's dominance of the northern Syrian airspace from its bases in Latakia.⁸⁴ Although Presidents Putin and Erdoğan rapidly restored relations after the Turkish air force downed a Russian fighter in 2015 when it suited them, the price Ankara had to pay for Russian support was steep. In exchange for Russian consent for its operations in northern Syria and restraining the Syrian Kurds, Turkey became a full sponsor of the Russian-initiated Astana peace negotiations – increasing its legitimacy as an alternative pathway to peace next to the UN's Geneva process – and had to accept, at least implicitly, that President Assad would continue to lead Syria.⁸⁵ In addition, by seeking Russian support for its intervention in northern Syria, Turkey also deepened its rift with the US. Ideologically, Turkey marketed these manoeuvres with reference to the newly-minted notion of 'Eurasianism', which was briefly discussed above.⁸⁶

In brief, the domestic power consolidation of the AKP in Turkey enabled the party to engage in an ambitious revisionist effort of the regional political order when the Arab Spring broke. Initially, this took shape largely via support for Muslim Brotherhood-related groups. In Syria this meant Turkish support for an array of FSA (including the Muslim Brotherhood) and more radical Sunni groups. However, when the AKP-PKK peace talks collapsed and the AKP lost its absolute majority in the June 2015 elections, anti-Kurdish narratives and actions swiftly emerged as instruments to restore AKP domestic political dominance. This was both facilitated and necessitated by the PKK's urban campaign of violence that followed the failure of the peace talks. Meanwhile, the rise of IS and, later, the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war contributed significantly to the failure of Turkey's initial strategy to overthrow President Assad by aiding and abetting a range of armed opposition groups. To revitalize this strategy, Turkey essentially turned a blind eye to IS, albeit for a limited period.

84 Kasapoglu, C. (2018), *Control of the Syrian airspace: Russian geopolitical ambitions and air threat assessment*, Berlin: SWP Comment no. 14.

85 Issaev, L. (2018) 'Why Russia is helping Turkey in Afrin?' *Al-Jazeera*, online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russia-helping-turkey-afirin-180125122718953.html> (accessed 1 June 2018); Aliriza, B and Yekeler, Z. (2018) 'Understanding Turkey's Afrin Operation', online: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-turkeys-afirin-operation>, (accessed 14 May 2018)

86 Incidentally, the Turkish intervention also usefully demonstrated Russia's ability to affect the objectives of the Syrian regime itself as Russia – and not President Assad – greenlighted the Turkish interposition. Haid, H. (2018) 'Why did Russia abandon Afrin?', *Middle East Eye*, online: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-did-russia-abandon-afirin-1509120871> (accessed 1 June 2018); Perry, T. and Coskun, O. (2018) 'US-led coalition helps to build new Syrian force, angering Turkey', *Reuters*, online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-led-coalition-helps-to-build-new-syrian-force-angering-turkey-idUSKBN1F30OA> (accessed 14 May 2018).

Exhibit 2: Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq

Turkish foreign policy towards Iraq between 2002 and 2018 focused largely on its relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in particular. Turkey's main priorities were, and continue to be, increasing its exports and maintaining KRG support in its fight against the PKK. On both counts, it has been rather successful. For example, towards the end of 2013 Turkey signed an energy agreement with the KRG that enabled oil to be pumped directly to Turkey to the volume of around 500,000 barrels a day (about one-seventh of total Iraqi exports).⁸⁷ In fact, Iraq was Turkey's third-largest export partner between 2007 and 2016.⁸⁸ The scale of the successful economic Turkish-Kurdish relationship even replaced the longstanding Turkish policy of intolerance and animosity towards autonomous Kurdish regimes in its immediate neighbourhood.

In return, the KRG continues to allow several Turkish military bases to exist on its territory, as well as Turkish military operations to take place in northern Iraq that are aimed at limiting the PKK's ability to manoeuvre, rest and recuperate.⁸⁹ The deeper explanation for the persistence of these bases and the apparent lack of intra-Kurdish solidarity lies in the complexities of Kurdish power politics. As the PKK consolidated its power in northern Iraq in the 1990s and aligned itself with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK),⁹⁰ KDP-PKK relations suffered and a power rivalry emerged between them.⁹¹ Turkey subsequently started to support the KDP-Peshmerga in their clashes with the PKK, as both the KDP and PKK claim the mantle of pan-Kurdish leadership.⁹² Turkey is paying a price for this arrangement, however, as the Iraqi central government does not consider Turkish-KRG relations in a positive light and has accused Turkey of interfering

87 Park, B. (2016), 'KRG-Turkey Relations from the KRG Perspective', in: Zeynep, K. (ed.), *The AKP and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Middle East Centre, London: LSE, Collected papers, Vol.5.

88 Turkish Statistical Institute, *Turkey's Annual Export by Countries 2007-2016*, online: <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist>. (accessed 9 January 2018).

89 Some of these bases date back to the 1990s. Bengin, Tunca (2017) 'Türk Askeri 25 yıldır Kuzey Irak'ta', *Milliyet*, online: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/tunca-bengin/turk-askeri-25-yildir-kuzey-irak-ta-2378294/> (accessed 19 April 2018); Riva, N (2017), 'Withdrawal of Turkish troops from Iraq soon to come: Iraqi PM', *Kurdistan 24*, Online: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8d1c0a10-3277-42d4-9130-e74ea039972f> (accessed 2 May 2018)

90 During the Iraqi Kurdish civil war between 1994-1997.

91 The PKK leans more heavily on Marxist-Leninist thinking while the KDP originally derives its power base from the tribal networks of the Barzani family. See for example: Chomani, K. (2013) 'Ocalan v.Barzani: Two contradictory worlds', *The Kurdistan Tribune online*: <https://kurdistantribune.com/ocalan-v-barzani-two-contradictory-worlds/> (accessed 13 April 2018).

92 On party-political divisions within the Peshmerga: Fliervoet, F. (2018), *Fighting for Kurdistan? Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq*, The Hague: Clingendael.

in Iraq's domestic affairs on several occasions.⁹³ Nevertheless, the cost of deteriorating relations between Turkey and Iraq has up to now been negligible for Turkey.

Several episodes suggest, however, that the relation between Turkey and the KRG is one of pragmatic convenience and skewed in favour of Turkey. For example, when the Iraqi Kurds came under attack from IS in 2014, the KRG leadership had expected greater Turkish support on top of what it received from its international partners.⁹⁴ Yet, Turkish assistance for the Peshmerga remained extremely limited throughout the entire fight.⁹⁵ The explanation for this lies in Turkey's general ambivalence towards the IS, which it did not initially see as a serious threat, and in Turkish long-standing conflict with the PKK, which it sees as linked with the Syrian YPG. Hence, in 2014 Turkey launched a military training programme for the Peshmerga forces of Iraq's Kurds rather than providing direct combat support. This introduced a somewhat sour note into Turkish-Kurdish relations, especially when the IS onslaught intensified. President Erdoğan's termination of the Turkish-PKK peace process in 2015 provided a second note of discord, in part because it was followed by a resumption of air strikes against PKK positions in northern Iraq. Finally, the rhetoric of Turkey's political leadership turned sharply against the KRG when it went ahead with its 'independence referendum' in September 2017.⁹⁶ Ankara considered independence as materially different from autonomy and viewed an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq as a dangerous precedent for Turkey's own Kurds. Once the Iraqi government had called its wayward Kurdish region to order, Turkish-KRG relations were restored rather quickly, however, suggesting that the failure of the Kurdish independence bid had produced no lasting damage.

On balance, it can be argued that positive relations between Turkey and the KRG (especially the KDP) represent one of Turkey's more notable foreign policy successes in the region. As it stands, the KRG is now almost wholly economically dependent on Turkey, which means it must continuously take good note of Ankara's strategic policy preferences. It is worth noting that the creation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2003–05) predates Turkey's reinvigorated anti-Kurdish strategy of 2015 by a significant period. This makes it an exception to Turkey's current aggressive approach towards the PKK and

93 Cagatay, S. and T. Evans (2012), *Turkey's Changing Relations with Iraq*, Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 122.

94 Bernardo, A. (2015), *Multiple Coalition countries training Iraqi Forces*, United States Central Command: CJTF-OIR Public Affairs, online: <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/885226/multiple-coalition-countries-training-iraqi-forces/> (accessed 10 January 2018).

95 Park (2016), *op.cit.*

96 Fliervoet, F. (2017), *The survival game: Post-referendum politics in Iraqi Kurdistan*, Open Democracy, online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/feike-fliervoet/survival-game-post-referendum-politics-in-iraqi-kurdistan> (accessed 14 April 2018).

YPG. Dealt the 'bad hand' of Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, which it could not control, Turkey played it well by encapsulating the KRG in its sphere of influence, which was greatly facilitated by intra-Kurdish tensions between the PKK and KDP.

Exhibit 3: Turkey's position amid Iranian – Saudi rivalry

After the AKP had more or less consolidated its control over the state, Turkish foreign policy gradually complemented its traditional European orientation with a greater focus on the Middle East. Turkey successfully played to the interests and issues of key regional players with its mix of trade/investment and politico-religious moderation/modernisation. The groundwork for this approach had been laid by Ahmet Davutoglu and it enabled positive sum economic thinking to guide Turkish foreign policy for some time, i.e. the exercise of soft power based on mutual economic advantage. This approach enabled Turkey to maintain positive relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia until 2011 – no mean feat.

For example, a Turkish-Saudi Business Council was established in 2003, with mutual visits between the respective heads of state further increasing cooperation. Turkey and Saudi Arabia also saw eye-to-eye politically on a range of issues including Palestine, Lebanon and the Kurds while they both opposed the Iranian nuclear energy programme and its regional expansion.⁹⁷ Turkey nevertheless also engaged in mediation efforts between Iran and the West in respect of the former's nuclear programme. This resulted in a joint declaration between Turkey, Brazil and Iran in 2010 that aimed to mitigate Western concerns as well as forestall sanctions.⁹⁸ Furthermore, when NATO deployed missile defence systems to Turkey in 2010, the latter sought to reassure Iran by announcing that the systems were meant solely for defensive purposes.⁹⁹ In short, Turkey tempered global realpolitik with the pragmatism of good neighbourliness based on an economic foundation.

Yet, as noted, the Arab uprisings saw the AKP leadership engage in an ambitious effort to socially engineer the regional political order and make good on 'the regional shift towards political Islam' that it saw occurring with Muslim Brotherhood-inspired parties coming to power in Egypt and Tunisia.¹⁰⁰ Qatar rapidly became Turkey's new ally – the pair being united in their support for the Muslim Brotherhood-variety of political Islam –

97 Ataman, M. (2012), 'Turkish-Saudi Arabian Relations During the Arab Uprisings: Towards a Strategic Partnership', *Insight Turkey*, Vol.14, No.4, p.124.

98 Amr, H. (2010), 'Debate on Sanctions After Brazil and Turkey's Offer', *Brookings*, online: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/debate-on-sanctions-after-brazil-and-turkeys-offer/> (accessed 19 April 2018).

99 Inat, K. (2011) 'Türkiye'nin Iran Politikası 2011', *Ortadoğu Yılığ*, p. 15.

100 Tahiroglu (2017), *op.cit.*

and together they energetically backed the Ennahdha Party, the Egyptian Brotherhood, Hamas and Brotherhood-related parts of the Syrian uprising. The Turkish-Qatari romance was symbolised by the creation of a Turkish military base in Qatar in 2014.¹⁰¹ Predictably, these moves earned Turkey the enmity of Saudi Arabia, for which both the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran represented 'the source of all evils' in the Arab world. In fact, Saudi Arabia outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation in March 2014.¹⁰² The rift was further deepened when Turkey maintained its Qatari alliance after the latter's quasi-expulsion from the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2017, and pragmatically used the blockade's economic consequences for Qatar to offset some of the financial losses resulting from its deteriorating relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Turkish-Iranian relations fared somewhat better after 2011 due to their common rejection of Kurdish aspirations for greater autonomy. Just as Turkey perceives the PKK as a terrorist organisation, Iran views its Iranian offshoot, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), as a terrorist group. Both countries view the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the PYD, in a similar light.¹⁰³ Aligning with Iran offered Turkey an opportunity to counter-balance the PYD in Syria despite longstanding Iranian support for the PUK and its links with the PKK. Apart from these more structural elements, Turkey and Iran were also nudged towards each other by the behaviour of third parties, notably the US. For example, the aggressive US policy towards Iran, combined with US-support for the Syrian Kurds, facilitated an interest-based cooperation between Iran and Turkey.¹⁰⁴ The official visit of the Iranian Chief of Staff, Mohammed Bagheri, to Turkey in August 2017 suggests that such collaboration continues to expand.¹⁰⁵

On balance, it is clear that Turkish-Saudi and Turkish-Iranian relations have largely been a function of shifting Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East – from regional economic cooperation towards an assertive pro-Muslim Brotherhood, pro-Sunni policy in the wake of the Arab Spring, the effects of which were moderated only in the case of Iran by a shared anti-Kurdish interest in Syria.

101 Bora, B. (2017), *Analysis: Why is Turkey Deploying troops to Qatar*, Al-Jazeera, 11 June, online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/analysis-turkey-deploying-troops-qatar-170607174911372.html> (accessed on 10 March 2017).

102 Al-Jazeera, *Saudi and the Brotherhood: From friends to foes*, online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/saudi-brotherhood-friends-foes-170623093039202.html> (accessed 22 March 2018); Aydin (2014), *op.cit.*

103 Daily Sabah, *Iranian envoy to Ankara confirms Tehran considers PYD, YPG terrorists*, online: <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2017/06/23/iranian-envoy-to-ankara-confirms-tehran-considers-pyd-ypg-terrorists> (accessed 12 January 2018).

104 Gürbüz, M. (2017), *Is the Turkey-Iran Rapprochement Durable in Iraq and Syria*, Washington DC: Arab Center.

105 Dalay, G. (2017), *Is there really a Turkey-Iran rapprochement?*, online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/09/turkey-iran-rapprochement-170907101356869.html> (accessed 14 January 2018).

Conclusion

To understand Turkish foreign policy, one must consider the AKP's electoral fortunes, its gradual capture of the Turkish state and the persistent influence of its Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Islamism as key explanatory factors. These factors are moreover situated against the backdrop of the modern Turkish state-building project – which is active, unsettled and, hence, dynamic. This report has provided ample evidence for the assertion that Turkey's foreign policy has, to a significant extent, been the result of its domestic politics over the past 16 years. In this regard, Turkey is like many other countries.

What makes the connection more salient is the depth and extent of the contention that has characterised the development of the Turkish state since 2002, which both triggered and enabled significant ruptures in Turkish foreign policy. In the context of the explosive regional situation the country has found itself in since 2011, Turkey's foreign policy has become less predictable, more revisionist and more issue-based (in the sense of lacking an overall strategy). This creates risks for both Turkey and Europe, including:

- From having been a regional role model and conflict mediator, Turkey has become party to the Syrian conflict and to various dimensions of the Kurdish conflict. For example, its use of proxies in the Syrian civil war contributes to the region's violence and fragmentation. This prevents Turkey from playing a more positive peace-making role.
- Turkey's policy to overthrow President Assad has been a complete failure and this will sour its relations with the Syrian regime in the near to medium-term.
- Turkey has been successful in containing the Syrian, Turkish and Iraqi Kurds through a mix of aggressive securitisation (Syria, Turkey) and creating economic dependence (Iraq), but this will arguably come at the long-term price of having revitalised Kurdish nationalism and militancy within its own borders.
- By becoming a partner in the Iran-Qatar 'camp' and by acting as Russia's and Iran's 'junior partner' in Syria (the price Turkey had to pay for being able to conduct its anti-Kurdish operations) the country's foreign policy has become more partisan and more regional. The US in particular, but European countries as well, interpret this as a move away from the West.
- In parallel, Turkey has downgraded its institutionalised partnerships with Europe (the EU, NATO and Council of Europe, especially) through a mix of assertive rhetoric

and emphasis on the notion of 'Eurasianism'. While this development is somewhat rhetorical in nature, the impression is easily conveyed that formal institutional alliances centered on the 'West' are being replaced by informal alliances of convenience with the 'East'.

It is tempting to suggest that the Turkish elections of June 2018 will stabilise both the country's domestic political contestation and its foreign policy, but there are several considerations that militate against such a proposition. These include Turkey's divided political landscape, the down-but-not-out state of the Gülenist movement, the deteriorating state of the Turkish economy and the desire of President Erdoğan to stay in power at all costs. In short, it is more likely that personalised rule, domestic political contestation and ideological choices will continue to increase the unpredictability and reduce the effectiveness of Turkish foreign policy. At the same time, Turkey has few economic alternatives to Europe. It is for this reason that, despite fiery rhetoric, transactional relations and pragmatism are likely to continue to dominate behind the scenes on this particular front.

A productive approach for European countries is to deal with Turkey as a society between the rock of a prolonged authoritarian domestic crisis and the hard place of regional power competition. One practical element of such an approach is to keep the economic relationship as stable as possible to dampen further shifts towards populism and strong-arm politics. Another practical element is to stimulate Turkish-Kurdish dialogue, along with remaining democratic and liberal elements of Turkish civil society, with the aim of supporting more balanced understandings of democracy than purely majoritarian ones. Through this mix, European countries can strike a balance between good neighbourliness and providing a modest counterweight to Turkey's growing authoritarianism. In the process, they should expect little change in Turkey's interests and behaviour in either Syria or Iraq.