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THE FAILURE OF ISLAMISM IN TURKEY RESHUFFLES THE REGION

In the early 2020s, several clear shifts were visible in the geopolitics of the Middle East. With President Trump leaving the White House, the U.S. policy on Iran shifted dramatically, back to the approach taken during the Obama Administration. Iran felt empowered and assertive after having weathered the Trump years, and without U.S. backing, several Gulf states changed track and sought to reduce tensions with Iran. Meanwhile, a major shift took place in Turkey, though this was not immediately visible in President Erdoğan's rhetoric. Under the surface, the Turkish government shifted not so subtly from Islamism to nationalism, leading to a reshuffling of Turkish priorities. The "Brotherhood Axis" was quietly buried, even though Erdoğan's personal diatribes sometimes suggested otherwise. This nationalist bent in turn put Turkey on a collision course with Iran both in Syria and

in the South Caucasus, further accelerating the rapprochement with the conservative Sunni bloc.

The Failure of Islamism in Turkey

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power with the stated intention of making Turkish society more Islamic. He repeatedly spoke of raising “pious generations.” As he consolidated power, it became clear that he was serious about this intention. Turkey’s religious bureaucracy, the *Diyanet*, grew exponentially in size, surpassing most government ministries and began to issue religious guidance on a variety of issues. Furthermore, the government invested heavily in making the education system more religious. A massive education reform in 2012 paved the way both for increasing the religious content of education in secular schools, and growing the share of religious *imam-hatip* schools compared to the secular ones. These schools were originally intended to produce imams for Turkey’s many mosques, but over time developed into a parallel education system, producing millions of students, including girls, who are not allowed to become imams. But *imam-hatip* schools were lavished with funds – in 2018, the government spent double the amount of money per student in religious schools compared to secular schools.¹¹³

The imam-hatip schools have better facilities and are less cramped than their secular counterparts. Still, they have not succeeded in attracting parents. The reason is simple: religious schools badly underperform other schools in academic quality. Their graduates score much lower on university entrance exams,

113 Daren Butler, “With More Islamic Schooling, Erdoğan Aims to Reshape Turkey,” *Reuters*, 25 January 2018,

and thus having much lower chances of gaining admission to university programs. As a result, even in religiously conservative areas, Turkish parents have protested the government efforts to transform secular schools into imam-hatip schools. It appears they are more interested in their children's ability to get an education and succeed in the labor market than in raising a pious generation.

The problem goes deeper: even students at imam-hatip schools no longer appear to follow the mold. The Turkish Education Ministry in 2018 issued a report that raised the alarm about the rise of deism among imam-hatip students. Apparently, a not insignificant number of young people found the education in religious schools so unconvincing that they began to doubt the precepts of Islam. While they did not go so far as to become atheists, they embraced a “deist” approach instead, an individual spirituality decoupled from Islamic principles.¹¹⁴

Opinion polls bear out the decline of Islamic observance in Turkey during Erdogan's tenure in power. Between 2001 and 2018, the number of people who reported that religion played a “very important” part in their life declined from 80 to 60 percent. Fasting during the month of Ramadan has declined from 77 to 65 percent. Among young people in particular, religious observance is down – and the phenomenon is particularly clear among the children of the religious middle class that moved into the major cities from the 1970s onward and became the main support base of the AKP.

Many observers have pointed to the irony that religious observance in Turkey grew when the state imposed restrictions

114 Mucahit Bilici, “The Crisis of Religiosity in Turkish Islamism,” *Middle East Report*, no. 288, Fall 2018.

on religion, but declined when the state instead began to impose religion on the population. Scholars have shown that this is in fact quite a predictable result of state interference in private matters such as religion, pointing to examples ranging from the United States to Iran to show the negative effect on religiosity of politicization of religion.¹¹⁵

In the Turkish case, several factors combined to ensure Erdogan's effort to Islamize Turkey ended in failure. These include technological change, the corruption and clientelism of the regime, and not least the 2016 coup.

Technological change is perhaps the most obvious factor that Erdogan could do very little about. In 2022, 75 percent of Turks were estimated to own a smartphone. The country's youth, therefore, is well-connected and aware of developments in the country and around the world – while obviously being susceptible to the same type of manipulation as smartphone users elsewhere. While Erdogan has been known to say his ideal model of a young person is one with a computer in one hand and a Quran in the other, it seems that young people connected to the world through their smartphones are less inclined to follow religious dogma.

One reason for this is the widespread corruption and clientelism that Erdogan's regime has been associated with. Erdogan's party acronym AK also means "white" in Turkish, a swipe at the corruption of the center-right parties it challenged two decades ago. But few people see the party as pure in any sense. It is telling that the decline of religious belief is particularly visible in the children of the social class closest to the regime itself. And the

115 Murat Çokgezen, "Can the State Make you More Religious? Evidence from Turkish Experience," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 61 no. 2, 2022.

perhaps most damning indictment of the Erdogan regime is that ideological Islamists have deserted the party. The unreconstructed Islamist Felicity Party was always in opposition to Erdogan, but in recent years made common cause with the opposition Nation Alliance led by the center-left CHP – thus depriving Erdogan of the ability to call his opposition ungodly. Separately, the son of Necmettin Erbakan, the founder of Turkish Islamism, created a breakaway Islamist party of his own in 2018, which began to eat away at the AKP. And Erdogan's former running mate Ahmet Davutoglu broke off to create the Future Party in 2019, allying in parliament with the Felicity Party. Not to be outdone, former Minister of Economy and of Foreign Affairs Ali Babacan, supported by former President Abdullah Gül – both founders of the AKP – broke out to form the center-right DEVA party. None of these parties have had much electoral success, but they are an indication that the AKP increasingly consists of opportunists seeking proximity to power rather than ideologically convinced Islamists.

In addition, twenty years in power has politicized the religious brotherhoods that have historically been so crucial for religious parties to mobilize voters. As one Turkish Islamist told this author when speaking of religious brotherhoods, “they have all become businesses.” As the saying goes, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely – and the visible corruption associated with Erdogan, the regime, and the brotherhoods that support it has seriously compromised the perception of institutionalized religion in the country.

The Rise of Turkish Nationalism

The 2016 failed coup, as mentioned earlier, was a devastating blow to Islamist ideology in Turkey. It was for all practical purposes a civil war within the Turkish state between two wings of the Islamist movement – those led by Erdogan and Fethullah Gülen. The failure of the coup led Gülen’s wing to essentially be eradicated, undoing four decades of meticulous efforts to build power within the Turkish state. And while Erdogan emerged victorious and even strengthened his power following the failed coup, it was a hollow victory – because it further drove home the moral bankruptcy of political Islam for millions of Turks. And it deprived Erdogan of an Islamist power base in the bureaucracy, thus forcing him to look elsewhere for support.

As a result, by the end of the 2010s political Islam had run its course in Turkey. In spite of the leadership’s best efforts, the rulers appeared to alienate more people from religion than their promotion of religious conservatism managed to attract. In parallel, the composition of the ruling coalitions changed. The rift with the Gülenists deprived Erdogan of his most effective support base within state institutions, who first turned into deadly enemies and were subsequently purged. That in turn left a void in the state that needed to be filled. Significantly, Erdogan had not succeeded in building a loyal constituency large and educated enough to be able to man the bureaucracy. This forced him to turn to the right-wing nationalists that the Gülen-aligned prosecutors had recently targeted.

Several factors facilitated this grand bargain between Erdogan and right-wing nationalists. First, they largely share a common social base of conservative Turks that have a strong nationalist as

well as religious identity. Different people may emphasize ethnic or religious aspects of the identity to varying degrees, but since the military began to promote the idea of a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” in the 1980s, being Muslim and Turkish has come to become largely synonymous for much of the social base of the AKP and the nationalist MHP.

Secondly, the changes in regional affairs discussed in previous chapters brought about a rising sense of nationalism. The nationalist right had opposed Erdogan’s outreach to the Kurds and the negotiations with the PKK. Following the rise of the PKK-aligned statelet in northern Syria, the military and intelligence establishment prevailed upon Erdogan to drop this outreach and return to a traditional, hard-core security approach to the Kurdish issue, animated by Turkish nationalism.

New priorities in Turkish Foreign Policy

In the second half of the 2010s, domestic and foreign developments combined to lead to a new turn in Turkish foreign policy. Domestically, Islamism had weakened its hold on society, and nationalism was emerging as the hegemonic ideology in the country. To stay in power, Erdogan was forced to align his rhetoric to a more nationalist discourse. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood-focused foreign policy in the Middle East had turned into an utter failure, isolating Turkey in the region while giving birth to an unlikely alignment of countries – Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia truly make for motley crew that seemed only to have opposition to Turkey in common.

Meanwhile, the AKP government’s most fervent Islamist

ideologues had left politics or gone into opposition. This provided a vacuum that the country's security institutions were more than willing to fill. And the Turkish military and intelligence bureaucracies were, more than anything else, animated by Turkish nationalism. These nationalists saw no reason to seek fights with Saudis or Emiratis, or for that matter with Egyptians and Israelis. They were not interested in the Sunni Arab Middle East for any ideological reason. If anything, they harbored a strong disdain for Iran and its regional ambitions, something that led them view regional affairs similarly to their Gulf Arab counterparts. And contrary to Turkey's Islamists, they were very much interested in their Turkic kin in Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states.

Expanding Turkey's Footprint in the East

During the AKP's first decade in power, Turkey showed relatively little interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The AKP government in 2009-10 embarked on an effort of reconciliation with Armenia – a complex relationship marred both by ancient and more recent history. In this endeavor, the AKP government received the full support of Turkey's liberal intelligentsia, which had long since been predisposed to a normalization of relations with Armenia. To Turkey's liberals, acknowledging that a genocide was committed against the Ottoman Empire's Armenian population in 1915 was an important step in Turkey's democratization, and to that one that would facilitate Turkey's European integration. But to Turkey's nationalists, normalizing relations would be unthinkable as long as Armenia continued to occupy

large territories in Azerbaijan, the Turkic country most closely linked with Turkey.

Meanwhile, Turkey's increasingly Islamist policies at home were met with great alarm in Central Asian capitals. All six countries, including Azerbaijan, were firmly committed to a secularist agenda, and much preferred the old, Kemalist Turkey that they had seen as a model.

It should be noted that the Armenian "opening" was not Erdogan's handiwork, but largely run by then-President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Ali Babacan. In fact, Erdogan was the one who stepped in to halt the process once the impact of the initiative on the AKP's nationalist-minded voters began to be seen in polls. This intervention cemented the personal relationship between Erdogan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, in spite of the obvious differences in lifestyle and outlook between the highly secular Aliyev family and the Islamist Erdogan.

As Turkey's Middle Eastern adventures led it to become more regionally isolated by 2015 or so, the AKP leadership began paying closer attention to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Both Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu became increasingly frequent visitors to regional capitals. But it was toward the end of the 2010s that the shifting priorities came to view. Turkey became a much more active participant in the Council of Turkic-Speaking states – a body that had largely been driven by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan during the period of Turkey's focus on its Brotherhood agenda in the Middle East.

Turkey's engagement with the region was also aided considerably by the uptick in relations with Uzbekistan following

the passing of that country's long-time leader Islam Karimov. A dedicated secularist, Karimov cracked down with an iron fist on expressions of religiosity that he perceived as threatening to Uzbekistan's stability. His successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev adopted a less repressive and more constructive approach to religious matters, all while remaining committed to the secular nature of the state. This opened up for a rapid improvement of relations: Erdogan visited Tashkent for the first time in 13 years in November 2016, only weeks after Karimov's demise.

Meanwhile, Central Asian leaders began to take note of Turkey's possible role as counterbalancing force to Russian influence. Turkish-Russian relations were on a rollercoaster in the mid-2010s as the two powers clashed in Syria. Turkey's shoot-down of a Russian jet along the Syrian border in 2015 was a major event, which nevertheless led to Russia slapping sanctions on Turkey that hurt the Turkish economy significantly. While Turkey eventually had to apologize for that event, it found itself in proxy conflict with Russia in Syria as well as in Libya. Then came the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had heated up throughout the 2010s, as Armenia's approach grew increasingly uncompromising – Armenian leaders began referring to occupied territories in Azerbaijan as “liberated” territories, sponsored the settlement of ethnic Armenians from the Middle East in these territories, and the defense minister even spoke of “new wars for new territories.” The 2018 velvet revolution that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power initially seemed to augur well for the peace process, as Pashinyan was, unlike his two predecessors, not from Karabakh and initially appeared interested in seeking a nego-

tiated settlement. But as Pashinyan came under pressure from nationalist groups, his rhetoric grew even harsher than that of his predecessors.

Not staying at harsh rhetoric against Azerbaijan, Armenia also provoked Turkey's ire by staging large commemorations of the hundredth anniversary of the defunct 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which would have created an Armenian state on large parts of present-day Turkey's territory. Armenia's President mentioned that the Treaty, while never implemented, remains "in force" – thus laying territorial claims on Turkey.¹¹⁶ Former Armenian National Security Adviser Gerard Libaridian defined the statement as a "declaration of at least diplomatic war" on Turkey.¹¹⁷

Ankara may have seen it as more than diplomatic. In retrospect, it appears this was the point at which the Turkish leadership decided to back Azerbaijan's aim to restore its authority over the areas of Azerbaijan that had been occupied by Armenia since 1994. Turkish weapons sales to Baku shot through the roof over summer 2020, and the two countries organized large-scale military exercises in early August. Crucially, Turkey left several F-16 fighter jets in Azerbaijan following these exercises, a clear deterrent against any external power – be it Russia or Iran – that would have considered intervening to stop Azerbaijan's military operation.

That operation, which led to the 44-day war in October–November 2020, featured the use of advanced Turkish and Israeli military technology that Armenian forces, in the absence of a Rus-

116 "President Armen Sarkissian: "The Treaty of Sèvres even today remains an essential document for the right of the Armenian people to achieve a fair resolution of the Armenian issue", President.am, August 10, 2020.

117 Gerard Libaridian, "A Step, This Time a Big Step, Backwards," Aravot, September 1, 2020.

sian intervention, were unable to answer. A Russian-negotiated cease-fire deal was announced on November 9, ushering in a new reality in the South Caucasus that for the first time since independence featured another outside power as an important security guarantor. This reality – with Turkey emerging as a power in the post-Soviet space – was codified in June 2021 through the Shusha Declaration, a mutual defense treaty between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

These developments were duly noted in Central Asian capitals. Particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Central Asian states and particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan began fast-tracking the expansion of military and intelligence cooperation with Turkey, all while expanding their defense spending. They also began developing defense cooperation with one another, with the Azerbaijani-Uzbek cooperation expanding rapidly alongside the already existing Azerbaijani-Kazakh and Uzbek-Kazakh relations.

Also in 2021, Turkic cooperation took a new step as the Turkic Council was upgraded to a full international organization, the Organization of Turkic States. This new body is becoming an important feature of regional affairs, playing a visible role in the diplomacy of both Turkey, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states. Obviously, the OTS is competing with Russian-led and Chinese-led programs in the wider Central Asian area, and it remains to be seen whether Turkey has the wherewithal to keep expanding its influence in Central Asia in a meaningful way, without triggering active efforts by Beijing or Moscow to counter it.

Still, the expansion of Turkish interests eastward indicate just how much Turkish foreign policy has changed in a decade.

From seeking to support the creation of a Muslim Brotherhood-based network of power across the Middle East, Turkey is now focusing on developing an alliance with secularist governments in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This has won Turkey new friends, and relieved its problems with some powers – but it has also put it on collision course with others – most notably Iran.

Clashing with Iran in Syria and the Caucasus

Before the Arab Upheavals, Erdogan's government had put considerable effort into a rapprochement with Iran. While Turkey's Islamists are strongly Sunni and harbor traditional skepticism of Shi'a Iran, the Brotherhood ideology that influence Turkish Islamism was considerably more pro-Iranian. And following the 1979 Islamic revolution, Turkish Islamists adopted largely positive views of Iran. During Khomeini's lifetime in particular, Tehran's efforts to export the revolution had a wide-ranging impact on Turkish Islamism.

Although traditional Turkish Islamic milieus typically viewed the Iranian Shi'a as deviant and schismatic, Islamist thinkers after 1979 emphasized and repeated the Khomeini regime's pan-Islamist rhetoric emphasizing the political importance of *Ummah* – the worldwide community of Muslims. When Erdogan's Welfare Party grew to prominence in the 1990s, a large number of its cadres had been profoundly influenced by the ideological defenders of the Iranian revolution. By 2001, when the AKP was formed as the successor to the Welfare Party, pro-Islamic Revolution leaders were of an age that allowed them to

exercise greater political and ideological influence over Turkish Islamist and Islamic thought as a whole.

During the AKP's time in power, its leadership up to 2011 showed considerable deference to Iran, and, at times, actively worked to court Tehran. Iran saw Turkish-American controversies over the Iraq war as an opportunity to step forward and ingratiate itself to Turkey. By the mid-2000s, more than 50 percent of Turks viewed Iran favorably, while percentages of those who held positive views of the U.S. were in the single digits.¹¹⁸ This gave Erdoğan a freer hand to take the relationship with Iran to another level, while he gradually dismantled Turkey's historically close relationship with Israel. Remarkably, in this period Turkey became a defender of Iran's nuclear program as well as an apologist for the Iran regime's brutal suppression of the 2009 "Green Revolution."¹¹⁹

Erdoğan and his foreign minister Davutoğlu went from seeking to mediate between Iran and the West on the nuclear issue to becoming outspoken defenders of Iran's nuclear program – Erdoğan, for example, urged world powers possessing nuclear weapons to abolish their own arsenals before meddling with Iran, and frequently drew the analogy to Israel's nuclear arsenal.¹²⁰ This approach was in part a result of the Pan-Islamic thinking of leading AKP intellectuals like Davutoğlu. In his academic work, Davutoğlu urged Turkey and other Muslim societies to work for Islamic unity. Erdoğan and Davutoğlu long viewed

118 Daphne McCurdy, "Turkish-Iranian Relations: When Opposites Attract," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2008.

119 Eric Edelman, Svante E. Cornell, Aaron Lobel, Michael Makovsky, *The Roots of Turkish Conduct*, Washington: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2013. <http://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/publications/1312BPC.pdf>.

120 "Erdoğan: Kimse İsrail'deki nükleer silahların hesabını sormuyor," *T24.com.tr*, March 30, 2012, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogan-kimse-israildeki-nukleer-silahlarin-hesabini-sormuyor,200555>

Iran as a potential partner that should be brought on board with Turkey's efforts to build Islamic solidarity and reshape the Middle East. Meanwhile, Ankara was actively seeking to establish itself as a senior partner to the Assad regime in Syria – an apparent contradiction given that regime's dependence on Iran.

More material considerations were also at play. Turkish-Iranian commercial relations stretch deeply into the Turkish Islamist movement, including senior figures close to Erdoğan. The reach of Iran's tentacles into Turkey were evident in the major Iran-Turkey oil-for-gold scandal involving Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab. An indictment in the United States District Court for the Second District of New York charged that Iranian efforts to circumvent and violate U.S. sanctions, spearheaded by Zarrab, involved multi-million dollar bribes to several key members of Erdoğan's cabinet and extended to influential officials in Turkish state-owned banks.¹²¹

From 2011 onwards, however, growing sectarian violence in the Middle East again changed the Turkish Islamist movement's view of Iran. While the AKP peddled a pan-Islamic approach built on seeking consensus among Muslims against western influence and "colonialism," it was confronted with Iran's resolute, uncompromising and Shi'a sectarian approach.

Turkey's reckoning with Iran would unfold in Syria. While Turkish leaders after 2011 saw the Sunni majority's rise to power (represented by the Muslim Brotherhood) as both unavoidable and desirable, Iran provided the regime with the option of full-scale repression. Iran not only endorsed but actively supported the

121 United States District Court, Southern District of New York, Superseding Indictment, S4 14 Cr. 867 (RMB), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/994976/download>.

Syrian regime's brutal repression, which led to the flight of several million Syrians to Turkey.

The Iranian regime and its client militias then established a corridor linking Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea across Iraq. Meanwhile, Turkish-supported Brotherhood-led forces proved incompetent on the battlefield, forcing Ankara to rely increasingly on radical militias, including Al Qaeda-aligned groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. But beginning in 2018, Ankara doubled down on its involvement in Syria by inserting its own troops into the country's north, with a view to create a permanent Turkish zone of influence. This further deepened its relationship with Sunni Islamist militias, which now functioned as Turkish proxies. In 2019, Turkey also became directly involved in fighting against the Assad regime. As a result, the Turkish Islamist government found itself in a proxy war against Iran's Islamist government. In February 2020, over 30 Turkish troops were killed by Syrian forces, leading to a massive Turkish retaliatory attack that targeted both Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces. Given Iran's presence on the ground in Syria, this risked bringing the two powers in direct confrontation, while Turkey also targeted Russian materiel and came into conflict with Russian proxy forces.

The intensity of Turkey's intervention in northern Syria was unprecedented. Less than six months later, Turkey's endorsement of Azerbaijan's operation to restore control over its occupied territories also worsened relations with Iran. Fearful of Azerbaijani separatism inside Iran, the Tehran regime had developed into Armenia's most reliable sponsor and supporter on the international scene. Furthermore, for Iran, Armenia served as a convenient wedge separating Turkey from the rest of the Turkic world.

But after the 2020 44-day war, Turkey and Azerbaijan insisted on the inclusion of a clause in the cease-fire agreement that envisaged a transport corridor being created through southern Armenia, in order to link Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan and onward to Turkey. Armenia and Azerbaijan disagreed on the nature of this corridor, with Azerbaijan demanding extra-territorial control over it – something that in turn would jeopardize Iran's access to Armenia.

Tensions rose further in September 2022 as Azerbaijan and Armenia clashed over undemarcated parts of their common border. Azerbaijan gained control over higher ground that provided it with an advantageous position for a possible military operation targeting southern Armenia. Only a month later, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards ground forces launched large-scale military exercises on the Iranian border with Azerbaijan. These exercises included staging amphibious operations to cross the Araxes River, thus simulating an Iranian ground invasion of Azerbaijan. They were paired with Iranian warnings to Azerbaijan concerning the creation of a Zangezur corridor, and threats to curtail the country's military and security cooperation with Israel.¹²²

Two months later, Turkey and Azerbaijan staged the largest military exercises to date on the northern side of the Iran-Azerbaijan border. Ankara and Baku also practiced amphibious crossings of the Araxes, and pointed to the modern nature of their weaponry, which contrasted sharply with the antiquated equipment used by the Iranian military. Furthermore, the exercises were supervised by the Turkish Defense Minister as well as the Turk-

122 Aziza Goyushzade, "Iran Holds Military Exercises on Border Amid Tensions with Azerbaijan," *Voice of America*, October 20, 2022.

ish chief of general staff. This served as a further indication that Turkey now openly challenged Moscow's security dominance in the South Caucasus and sent a clear signal to Iran that Turkey was serious about its security commitment to Azerbaijan. In addition, Baku and Ankara both intimated that the exercises were part of the integration of the military forces of the two countries. While Azerbaijani and Turkish officials had long paid allegiance to the concept of "one nation, two states" to emphasize the closeness of the two people, they now added a third: "one army."¹²³

Meanwhile, Turkey was beginning to crack down on Iranian intelligence operations on its soil – numerous Iranian dissidents, including high-profile figures, had been abducted or attacked in Turkey. While Ankara in earlier times had handled such incidents discreetly, it now televised busts of Iranian spy rings. Turkish intelligence even proceeded to public media briefings on Iranian intelligence activity and its efforts to thwart it.¹²⁴

Turkey and Iran are thus locked in a rivalry both in Syria and in the Caucasus, with frequent differences of opinion on Iraqi affairs as well. This souring of relations occurred in parallel with a normalization of Turkish relations with Sunni Arab powers, another major shift in Turkish foreign policy.

Making up with the Arabs

As a result of its support for Islamist regime change across the Middle East, Turkey found itself increasingly isolated in the

123 Cavid Veliyev, "Azerbaijan-Türkiye military cooperation: One nation, one army," *Daily Sabah*, December 23, 2022.

124 Maryam Sinayee, "Turkish Intelligence Briefs Media On 'Iranian Kidnap Plot'," *Iran International*, February 12, 2022. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202202128669>)

aftermath of the overthrow of the Brotherhood regime in Egypt in 2013. As we have seen, Turkey aligned with Qatar and invested heavily in preventing the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt from succeeding in their effort to have would-be strongman Khalifa Haftar take control over Libya. Yet as Turkey's internal balances shifted in a nationalist direction, and the zealous pursuit of a Brotherhood axis faded, priorities also changed. The Turkish security establishment saw little reason to extend its spat with the Emiratis and Saudis, or in fact to antagonize Egypt and Israel. More likely, they saw these controversies as unnecessary distractions, particularly as Turkish views of Iran soured and regional balances changed.

However, several factors extended the cold war within the Sunni camp. First, Turkish leaders were in lash out-mode following the failed 2016 coup. They drew a direct connection between the 2013 coup in Egypt, the 2016 coup against Erdogan, and subsequently the blockade of Qatar. To Turkish leaders, these were not separate events but part of a grand conspiracy to undermine the Turkish-led axis in the Middle East. President Erdogan's reaction to the 2019 ouster of long-time Sudanese leader Omar Al-Bashir is indicative: Erdogan commented that the ouster was "directed against Turkey." While this would seem an outlandish statement, Erdogan felt that the ouster was directed against his long-time ally. Turkey in 2018 had begun to develop Suakin island, on the Red Sea, with the support of Qatar, a move that was not well received in Saudi Arabia. As such, the logic went, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had an interest in ousting Bashir to prevent Turkey from developing a military presence in Suakin and the Red Sea.¹²⁵

125 Dorian Jones, "Analysts: Ouster of Sudanese Leader Hurts Ankara's Regional Goals," *Voice of America*, April 29, 2019.

Turkish leaders in particular blamed Egypt and the UAE for supporting the Gulen movement. The Saudi and Emirati-led blockade of Qatar in 2017 deepened the conflict for some time, and the inclusion of demands that Qatar close down the Turkish military presence in the country strengthened the sense in Ankara that the blockade targeted Turkey's rise a regional power. Of course, in 2018, the fallout of the Khashoggi murder further delayed any process of normalization between Turkey and the Gulf monarchies.

Several factors led Turkey to reverse itself from 2020 onward. First, the election of Biden reshuffled the region as it was perceived to lessen pressures on Iran to advance its hegemonic agenda. By that time, Turkey had turned sufficiently against Iran that it was concerned that this changed balance of power would embolden Iran – thus strengthening the logic of finding common ground with the Arab monarchies. Second, Turkey's economy was in dire straits at the time. The lira had depreciated perilously against the dollar and Euro, with costs of living going through the roof. In 2019, the AKP lost the mayoral elections in both Istanbul and Ankara, something that emboldened Turkey's opposition and led to flashing red lights in the Presidential palace concerning the crucial presidential elections set for 2023.

With Western investment declining, Turkey needed capital to keep the economy afloat – and just relying on Qatar would not be sufficient. As a result, the pragmatic side of Erdogan understood that a rapprochement with the Sunni Arab powers was now necessary. Meanwhile, the state establishment and Erdogan's nationalist allies in government had long worked to suppress the ideological element in Turkish foreign policy. To them, Turkey

now suffered from the alignment of forces generated by its ill-fated ideological foray. In this respect, the Abraham Accords of August 2020 were a game-changer. While Erdogan initially lashed out at the Arab states that signed accords with Israel, the Accords confirmed that the alignment countering Turkey's regional ambitions was solidifying. First, the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum had indicated this, and now the start of formal relations between several Arab states and Israel consolidated it.

As a result, from 2021 onward Turkey was ready to recalibrate its rhetoric. It received a major boost from the January 2021 Al-Ula summit, in which the Gulf states and Qatar arrived at a reconciliation and normalization of relations. The timing of this agreement – coinciding with the transfer of power from Trump to Biden – was no coincidence. The Gulf monarchies saw an urgent need to resolve their problems in an environment where they may be left to deal with Iran on their own. The deal allowed Turkey to open relations with the Gulf monarchies without appearing to let down its ally Qatar. In fact, the deal instead provided Turkey with a rationale to appear to support a constructive process in the region.

Erdogan now took on a much more constructive tone in his speeches, and sought to reach out to the Gulf Arab states in order to reduce tensions and reinvigorate economic ties. In doing so, however, Ankara ran into a problem. Given Erdogan's aversion to Sisi, Turkey tried to focus on reaching out to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, leaving out Egypt – which offered little economic incentive. But Turkish leaders were met with a resolute

response: improve relations with all of us, or none. Reluctantly, Turkey complied.

Its efforts to rebuild relations with Abu Dhabi bore fruit in late 2021, when the Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed visited Turkey and announced a \$10 billion investment deal. On the Saudi front, Erdogan agreed to remove the main irritant in bilateral relations by transferring the Khashoggi murder case to Saudi jurisdiction. After visiting Jeddah in April 2022, Erdogan on his return ordered the closure of the Brotherhood-aligned Mekameleen television station, which operated from Turkish soil and sought to beam Brotherhood propaganda into Egypt.

Ankara had for some time asked the Egyptian Brotherhood activists in the country to downplay their rhetoric, but this step was a symbolic indication of Turkey's change of heart. Also in early 2022, Turkey asked the members of Hamas's military wing, the al-Qassam brigades, to leave the country – while continuing to allow Hamas political leaders to stay.¹²⁶ These steps in turn allowed for improvement of relations with both Israel and Egypt. In the latter case, the process was slow and suffered numerous bumps, but Erdogan finally shook hands with his erstwhile nemesis in Qatar during the 2022 World Cup, and finally visited Cairo in February 2024.

Implications

On the eve of Hamas's horrific October 7 pogrom in southern Israel, the Middle East appeared to have settled into a more predictable, traditional balance. The three-way competition between

126 Baruch Yedid, "Turkey to Expel Members of Hamas' Military Wing – Report," Jewishpress.com, February 17, 2022.

Iran, the radical Sunni group, and the conservative Sunni group appeared to be over. Instead, a newfound if sometimes reluctant alignment was emerging among the Sunni powers, in which the threat of Iran's regional ambition loomed large.

This new balance even held the promise of a larger breakthrough: Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords and opening full diplomatic and economic relations with Israel. Such a development – codifying and expanding a relationship that already had strengthened behind the scenes – would have been a major blow to Iran's effort to build its hegemonic position in the region. It would have augured well for the ability of regional states to check Iran's ambitions even in the absence of a strong American commitment to do so.

Perhaps, this shift was one reason that prompted the attack of October 7. Those attacks forced Israel to respond by seeking to eliminate Hamas in Gaza. Because of Gaza's urban geography and Hamas's willful use of human shields, such an operation would by necessity generate large civilian casualties. That would in turn put serious pressure on the newfound alignment among Sunni monarchies, Turkey and Israel – and all but rule out any Saudi-Israeli normalization in the short turn.