Turkey and the US in the Middle East: A Case for Alliance Change

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Abstract

Turkey-US relations in the Middle East have evolved significantly in recent years. Initially based on shared threat perceptions and strategic outlooks during the Cold War, the alignment became characterized by divergences on some issues after the Gulf War in 1991. Their relationship in the Middle East has even become hostile in recent years. Turkey's increased regional aspirations and evolving threat perceptions in the Middle East, framed within an ontological security narrative, have strained bilateral ties. This shift is compounded by divergent worldviews influenced by domestic political changes in both countries. Despite these challenges, the alliance persists within NATO, albeit with complexities arising from the interplay of external pressures and internal dynamics. This article explores these dynamics using a Neoclassical Realist framework to explain how Ankara's evolving threat perceptions and ontological security concerns have reshaped Turkey-US relations in the Middle East amid changing global and regional contexts.

1. Introduction

The Middle East has always been an important factor in Turkey-US relations. Yet, its role and meaning have evolved over time. Turkey-US relations have two dimensions, albeit at times interrelated: a multilateral one within NATO, and a bilateral one. Although the Middle East sometimes factored into the multilateral dimension of the relationship, primarily in the 1950s, especially since the end of the Cold War, the region has progressively turned into an independent factor in their bilateral relations. As the Cold War ended, the Middle East became important for both Turkey and the US, not so much as an extension of global politics but as a region of its own, presenting its own opportunities and threats. Although in this new context the two allies have been trying since the 1990s to cooperate on Middle East issues and manage their alliance, the increasing divergence of interests and worldviews has begun to erode their bilateral relations in the current century.

This article focuses on Turkey-US bilateral relations in the Middle East and how this alliance relationship has evolved from a "strategic partnership" in the 1990s to a state of mutual distrust and threat perception, especially since the 2010s. Despite not always being aligned on every issue, Turkey and the US shared a common threat perception during the

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Cold War. Even after the Cold War, they maintained a similar strategic outlook, particularly in those regions around Turkey experiencing significant transformation. For that reason, they chose to call their evolving relationship a "strategic partnership" in 1999 and as late as 2009.[1] Yet their bilateral relations in the Middle East have dramatically deteriorated since the 2010s. Thus, the article addresses how evolving threat perceptions and diverging ontological security narratives have influenced Turkey-US bilateral relations in the Middle East amidst shifting global and regional orders. This question highlights an important case of alliance change: despite the deterioration of their relations in the Middle East, their alliance within NATO continues. The article seeks to understand the changing nature of the alliance between Turkey and the US in the context of the Middle East by examining international systemic and unit-level variables. It is argued that the interaction of the external shifts and domestic transformations has facilitated an alliance change.

In analyzing alliance change, the article draws upon IR scholarship. Although alliance theory is highly developed in IR, most of the literature focuses on alliance formation and, to some extent, termination.[2] However, as Goh and Shashi claim, there is relatively little work on the "'in-between' questions: when and how alliances change in character or significance."[3] The issue of alliance change is important in analyzing Turkey-US relations, mainly due to its complex character, which is based on the existence of a dual dimension in their relationship. Thus, although bilateral aspects have become increasingly problematic, the multilateral aspect continues--despite challenges--within one of the most successful collective security organizations, NATO. The issue of change and the co-existence of two dimensions in Turkey-US relations present challenges to alliance theory. This article attempts to deal with this challenge by using the Neoclassical Realist framework as a heuristic device, integrating systemic level changes with unit-level variables. It focuses on the question of how can the Neoclassical Realist framework help to explain the evolution of Turkey-US bilateral relations in the Middle East from a 'strategic partnership' to mutual distrust and threat perception while maintaining an overall alliance? In answering this question, it also acknowledges that there is more to do in understanding and explaining such in-between cases in which the multilateral alliance persists yet bilateral relations in a particular region become highly conflictual.

The article first develops a conceptual framework to understand and explain the change in the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East. It then focuses on the historical foundations of the relationship, analyzing the nature of the relations during the Cold War when the multilateral dimension was relatively dominant. Finally, the changes in the bilateral relationship are analyzed in the last section by focusing on the 1990s and 2000s, when the Middle East progressively became the relationship's focal point.

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[1] "Remarks by the President in Address to the Turkish Grand National Assembly," November 15, 1999, accessed date November, 2023. https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/New/html/19991115.html; "Joint Statement by Turkey and the United States of America on the Occasion of the Visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton upon the invitation of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Ali Babacan," *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, March 7,, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-by-turkey-and-the-united-states-of-america-on-the-occasion-of-the-visit-of-us-secretary-of-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-upon-the-invitation-of-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey-ali-babacan.en.mfa

[2] Stephan Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[3] Evelyn Goh and Ryo Shashi, "Worldviews on the United States, Alliances, and the Changing International Order: An Introduction," *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 372.

2. Conceptual Framework

One can extrapolate the causes of change in alliances from the explanations of alliance formation. The most prominent explanations of alliance formation have been developed by the realist school of IR. According to these explanations, also called capabilities aggregation models, states ally to improve their security. They do so either by balancing power[4] or threat.[5] Especially the balance of threat explanation can be useful in explaining the change in alliances; thus, it can be argued that if the allies do not share a common threat or the magnitude of the threat decreases, this will lead to a change in the alliance. In the case of Turkey-US relations, for instance, the disintegration of the Soviet Union clearly had an impact on their alliance. The distinction between multilateral and bilateral dimensions in their relations, however, becomes once again important here: although the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not have a complete negative impact on Turkey's membership in NATO due to the fact that NATO membership provides other benefits to Turkey, it has led to a general deterioration of the bilateral alliance. This is particularly important in the Middle East as the two sides' threat perceptions and, thus, strategic priorities started to diverge. Therefore, for this article, the shift in the international system and, thus, the removal of the common threat perception that led to the alliance to start with, constitutes the general framework of change in the alliance, specifically in the Middle East.[6] But it does not by itself explain why this did not lead to the deterioration of the alliance in the 1990s and early 2000s as Turkey and the US cooperated on different issues, and again, it fails to account for the deterioration of bilateral relations since the 2010s. For that reason, one needs to focus on other variables.

The other group of explanations in alliance formation rely on what may be called domestic determinants.[7] Here, the argument is that, ultimately, who is a threat is determined domestically and thus is a function of different factors such as identity, ideology, and regime type. Therefore, one can extrapolate arguments for alliance change from domestic-level explanations and claim that the alliances may change and weaken if there are divergences of ideology and identity or overall worldviews between allies. Of course, regime change can also be seen as a factor leading to a change or even more to the termination of an alliance,[8] as happened between the US and Iran after the Iranian Revolution. In the case of change in the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East, several domestic factors can be cited: changes in domestic politics in the 1960s and 1970s or divergences of worldviews with the AKP. In the 1960s and 1970s, the questioning of Turkey's alliance with the US and even in NATO occurred in the context of the rise of fringe parties on the right and the left, their representation in the parliament due to the change in the election system, and increasing public debates about foreign policy. Similarly, starting from the 1990s, the Kurdish issue and its ups and downs have been an important factor in how foreign and security policy elite have approached Turkey's alliance with the US. On the other hand, individual leaders such as Turgut Özal played an important role in improving Turkey-US relations, also in the Middle East, in the context of a transforming global and regional order. The AKP rule in Turkey has contributed

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[4] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[5] Walt, *Origins of Alliances*.

[6] Lenore Martin, "Constructing A Realistic Explanation of Turkish-US Relations," *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 5 (2022): 765-783.

[7] Michael Barnett and Jack Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962–73," *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (1991): 369-395.

[8] James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904-933; Randolph M. Siverson and Harvey Starr, "Regime Change and the Restructuring of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 1 (1994): 145-161.

to the changes in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. Whether in cooperation or discord with the US, under the AKP, Turkey-US relations have become "games of strategy rather than partnership."[9]

A third group of explanations, broadly Neoclassical Realism (NCR), aimed to introduce systemic and unit-level explanations, and argued that, ultimately, it is international systemic factors that lead to the formation and survival of alliances by providing incentives, thus creating permissive or restrictive strategic environments for states.[10] Yet, these incentives were understood and evaluated through the domestic intervening variables.[11] Although which domestic variables are to be included still remains fuzzy, the list includes leadership and public opinion, among others.[12] This article will focus on the worldviews of leaders and the nature of domestic coalitions as the most significant domestic variables.[13] The NCR has been criticized for trying to reconcile the irreconcilable and still giving priority to the systemic variables.[14] More significantly for this study, NCR also reproduces a distinction between the external and the internal. Much of Turkey-US relations in the context of the Middle East, for instance, the increasing importance of the Kurdish issue, make it impossible to continue this distinction. Despite such limitations, the NCR is still considered useful for the analysis of this topic for two reasons: 1) it provides a framework to incorporate systemic and domestic level variables; and 2) it suggests that "a state's strategic environment (or security environment), defined as the magnitude of the external threats and opportunities it confronts at any given time, will have a more consequential impact on that state's foreign and security policies than the polarity of the international system."[15]

Focusing on the Middle East region in Turkey-US relations, this paper prioritizes the regional level. The importance of the regional level has been recognized in IR, especially after the end of the Cold War. For instance, Lake and Morgan[16] argue that with the end of bipolarity, "the regional level stands more clearly on its own as the locus of conflict and cooperation for states and as the level of analysis for scholars seeking to explore contemporary security affairs." However, this article aims to demonstrate that the regional level has always been important in Turkey-US relations. Therefore, being aware of its limitations, this study will use NCR as a heuristic device to understand and explain the change in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East and thus Turkey-US alliance since the Cold War years.

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[9] Ahmet K. Han, "From 'Strategic Partnership' to 'Model Partnership': AKP, Turkish-US Relations and the Prospects under Obama," in *Turkish Foreign Policy: Old Problems, New Parameters,* ed. Mustafa Aydın (Madrid: UNISCI, 2010), 148.

[10] Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "The Neoclassical Realist Research Paradigm and Its Independent Variable*," in Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-58.

[11] Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-172; Randall L. Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism," in *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field, eds.* Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 311-349; Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Lobell et al., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy.*

[14] Kevin Narizny, "On Systemic Paradigms and Domestic Politics: A Critique of the Newest Realism," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 155-190.

[15] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Defending Frenemies: Alliances, Politics and Nuclear Nonproliferation in US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 38.

[16] David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1997), 6.

3. Historical Foundations: The Cold War Years

One of the arguments of this article is that the Middle East dimension has been present in Turkey-US relations since the Cold War years. However, its meaning and impact on the relationship changed during the course of the Cold War due to shifts in the global and regional levels as well as domestic developments in Turkey. In that respect, the Cold War years are divided into three sub-periods with different global, regional, and domestic dimensions that were reflected in Turkey-US relations.

3.1 Immediate post-WWII Era: the overriding impact of global politics

In the immediate post-WWII period, Turkey's geopolitical place as "a bulwark against Soviet expansionism" in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean constituted the core of US interest in Turkey. The initial debate between the US and the UK, however, was whether this objective could be achieved via Turkey's active participation in a Middle East-centered security arrangement, a project that was especially favored by Britain.[17] Eventually, due to Turkey's insistence and the US's shifting perspective, Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952.[18] Yet the Middle East dimension did not disappear in Turkey-US relations. From the US's point of view, from the beginning, the value of its alliance with Turkey also included the Middle East. The US policymakers believed that Turkey, due to its geographical location between the Soviet Union and the Middle East, was crucial also in containing the Soviet influence in the eastern Mediterranean and the oil-rich Gulf. Therefore, in justifying Turkey's and Greece's membership in NATO, the US and the UK claimed that "the security of the whole Middle East would be jeopardized if Russia gained control of either Greece or Turkey, which would in turn jeopardize the security of the west as well."[19] In its support of Turkey's membership in NATO, the US administration often argued that "Turkish troops are the only ones (immediately available) for land defense," and that these troops were "located where they can be best utilized for Middle East defense, i.e. at the northern mountain line."[20] Furthermore, it is also argued that "with large efficient training schools organized with JAMMAT[21]" Turkey was in a unique position to "provide military training for Middle Eastern countries and [is] as a matter of policy willing to do so," and also "in a position to sell arms to the Middle Eastern states."[22]

More significantly, the idea that Turkey's cultural identity would be useful and that Turkey, which would become a member of NATO, could serve as a bridge with the Middle East, emerged even then. In a memo written by the State Department in 1950, American diplomats were asked to "[e]ncourage Turkey, which is able to understand and interpret Western views, to take a more active interest in promoting closer relations with the Middle East neighbors and to assume a role of leadership among the Moslem states."[23]

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[17] Ayşegül Sever, *Soğuk Savaş Kuşatmasında Türkiye, Batı ve Orta Doğu (1945-1958)* [Turkey, the West, and the Middle East in the Cold War Siege] (Istanbul: Boyut Yayınları, 1997).

[18] Turkey also became a very active member of the British-designed Baghdad Pact, which became highly unsuccessful and eventually dissolved after the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq, the only Arab member of the Pact.

[19] "Foreign Relations, Vol. 5, p. 260," *U.S. Department of State - The National Archives,* 1950, accessed date November, 2023. http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/059.html

[20] "Foreign Relations, Vol. 9. p. 202," *U.S. Department of State - The National Archives,* 1952–54, accessed date November, 2023. http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/059.html

[21] The Joint American Military Mission to Aid Turkey was a military modernization program established as part of the containment of the Soviet Union in the context of the Truman Doctrine.

[22] "Foreign Relations, Vol. 9. p. 202."

[23] "Foreign Relations, Vol. 5, p. 260."

Turkey accepted this role within the alliance and, especially in the 1950s, became heavily involved in Middle East affairs. Just before becoming a member of NATO, in 1951, the Turkish government had already announced that it was ready to "take on a defense role in the Middle East if they were admitted to NATO."[24] The Menderes government, which was in power in the 1950s, shared the perspective of the US administration that Turkey should play a role in supporting and protecting the interests of the Western bloc in the Middle East. The Menderes government indicated to US officials that Turkey could serve as a regional "locomotive," that could drag Arab states towards the Western bloc.[25]

At the height of the Cold War, the Middle East region was going through its own regional Cold War, characterized by fierce competition and, at times, rivalry between Arab nationalist republics and conservative monarchies.[26] Arabism was the dominant regional ideology and movement, leading up to regime changes in different countries while seriously challenging others. Like Washington, Ankara also failed to understand Arabism in its own right and mainly perceived it as a stooge of Soviet expansionism. Thus, Turkey and the US shared a common threat perception in the region and adopted policies to contain it. This was also in line with Turkey's policymakers' worldview, which was anti-Soviet and anti-communist.

Throughout this decade, Turkey became crucial in protecting Western interests, projecting US power in the region and containing the Soviet Union and Arab nationalist regimes. Ankara took the lead in establishing a pro-Western Baghdad Pact in 1955. In 1957, on the suspicion that a pro-Soviet group had taken power in Syria and that it had become a "Soviet satellite," Democrat Party officials called for the enactment of the Eisenhower Doctrine to prevent Syria from turning into a communist country.[27] As the US and the UK eventually proved unwilling to engage in military involvement, Turkey went ahead with its own plans to apply military pressure on Syria, an undertaking that attracted an angry response from the Soviets. Following an urging by the US administration, Turkey de-escalated its military activities.[28] A similar scenario was at play one year later when Turkey considered military intervention in Iraq following the military coup in 1958 that toppled the monarchy in that country. Yet again, Turkey was dissuaded by the UK and the US from engaging in military action, given the risk of pushing Iraq into the arms of the Soviet Union and Egypt. At times when the US and Britain undertook military action in the Middle East, Turkey enthusiastically expressed support. For example, the Turkish Foreign Ministry announced "complete approval" of the US military intervention in Lebanon, hailing the operation "as an effort to prop up the Lebanese government against the subversive activities of external forces," and allowing the use of Incirlik airbase in the intervention.[29] Similarly, Britain's deployment of troops to Jordan in 1958 also received approval from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, for whom the operation aimed to protect the legitimate government of Jordan. Prime Minister Menderes also expressed his contentment with these military interventions, saying Turkey was glad

[24] William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774 - 3rd edition* (Routledge, 2002).

[25] Hüseyin Bağcı, *Demokrat Parti Dönemi Dış Politikası* [Foreign Policy of the Democrat Party Period] (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları, 2007).

[26] Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1967: A Study of Ideology in Politics - 2nd edition* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1967).

[27] Reem Abou al-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[28] Ibid., 248-249.

[29] Irene Gendzier, *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon, 1945-1958* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

that the Middle East had not been left to its fate.[30] Turkey also recognized Israel in 1949 and became part of the secret peripheral alliance of David Ben Gurion, and thus established strategic relations with Israel between 1958–1960/63.[31] Therefore, in the 1950s, Turkey's policies in the Middle East were in line with those of the US. The US National Security Council Report in 1960 stated that "Turkey is of great importance in the US effort to build a position of strength in the Middle East."[32]

Yet, Turkey's activism in the Middle East in the 1950s sometimes went beyond Washington's expectations and desires. This became clear during the crisis with Syria when Turkey backed down only with US pressure. Similar disputes seemed to convince the Menderes government "that the United States preferred a far more modest role for Turkey in the Middle East."[33] Washington was indeed unhappy with what it perceived as Turkey acting to extend its own influence rather than limiting itself to advance the interests of the alliance: President Eisenhower complained privately in 1957 that DP ambitions went beyond "the job to be accomplished" (containing the Soviet Union within a NATO framework) and extended to a vision of Turkey as a regional power pursuing interests of its own."[34] Thus, as early as in the 1950s and at the height of the Cold War, a characteristic of Turkey's relations with the US in the context of the Middle East emerged, that is, even when Turkey's interests converged with the US in the region, as a regional power Turkey generally continued to have its own agenda as well.

2.2. 1960s-1970s: Reluctance to be active in the region

After the military overthrew the Menderes government, a major question for Washington was whether the new regime would continue to cooperate closely with the United States and NATO.[35] Raising this issue, the National Security Council (NSC) analysis in 1960 concludes that the new provisional government in Turkey would "likely continue its fundamental cooperation with the United States but is likely to be more independent than the previous government in assessing its own interests."[36] In fact, in the 1960s and the 1970s, Turkey increasingly became less eager to support the US policies in the Middle East. For instance, during both the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, Turkey refused to allow the US to use the bases and other facilities in Turkey to help Israel.[37] In fact, from then on, Turkey tried to separate its relations with the US from those with the Middle East as Turkish officials continued to declare the US and NATO facilities in Turkey would not be available for non-NATO military actions in the Gulf or elsewhere in the Middle East without prior Turkish approval.

These two decades were already being characterized by several crises in bilateral relations between Turkey and the US, starting with the Cuban Missile Crisis and culminating in the

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[30] Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy.*
[31] Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Çağrı Erhan, *Türkiye-İsrail Diplomatik İlişkilerinin Kuruluşu* [Establishment of Turkey-Israel Diplomatic Relations] (Istanbul: Altınbaş Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2023).
[32] "379. National Security Council Report – NSC 6015/1," *Department of the State – Office of the Historian*, October 5, 1960, accessed date November, 2023. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v10p2/d379
[33] Malik Mufti, *Daring and Caution in Turkish Strategic Culture: Republic at Sea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 35.
[34] Ibid.
[35] "379. National Security Council Report – NSC 6015/1."
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ayşe Ömür Atmaca, "The Geopolitical Origins of Turkish-American Relations: Revisiting the Cold War Years," *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 3, no. 1 (2014): 26.

Cyprus issue. From Turkey's perspective, the Cyprus issue, which erupted in 1963, began to dramatically influence Turkish foreign policy, and the lack of support from Turkey's Western allies led to some rethinking about Turkey's partnerships. Thus, during this period, Turkey began to work to improve its relations with other regions, including the Arab world. On the US side, Turkey's reluctance to be active in the Middle East, as well as Washington's shifting relations with the Soviet Union and its other Middle Eastern allies, decreased Turkey's importance. After all, for the main theatre, that is, Western Europe, Turkey's strategic importance was rather limited as a country located on the far south-eastern flank. Thus, up until the 1980s, relations between Turkey and the US became limited, particularly after the US imposed an arms embargo on Turkey from 1974–1980.

Overall, the changing global and regional context and domestic transformations in Turkey played an important role in changes in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s. These two decades were characterized by détente between the two superpowers, and thus, the urgency and the magnitude of the threat began to decline. In addition, the oil crisis of 1973-74 ushered in an intense global economic crisis and increased the importance of Arab oil producer states in many countries' foreign policy calculations. In the meantime, regional politics shifted from Arabism to "political petrolism," where the influence of Arab nationalist regimes began to progressively decline in regional politics after the Six-Day War in 1967, and the influence of conservative oil monarchies began to rise. All these developments decreased the sense of urgency of threats emanating from the Middle East, both in Ankara and Washington. Domestically, after the 1960 military coup, the adoption of the new constitution and election law opened up the domestic political space to varying viewpoints, and intense discussions about foreign policy including the questioning of relations with the US, started to take place.[38] Finally, in the 1970s, the internal strife between leftist and rightist groups, called the "anarchy period," led to enormous instability in the country; Turkey became much more inward-looking, and its activism in the Middle East became much more limited. Due to all these reasons, the US, with its "twin pillars policy," began to rely on its other allies, Saudi Arabia and Iran, rather than Turkey, to support its objective of "deradicalization" in the Middle East.

2.3. The 1980s: the emergence of limited cooperation in the region

With the beginning of the so-called Second Cold War in the 1980s, Washington wanted to renew its strategic cooperation with Turkey. This occurred due to developments in the Middle East and the Reagan administration's concerns about protecting the US position in this region, which was regarded as vital to US interests. The first challenge came with the fall of the Shah in 1979, the so-called military pillar, and the establishment of an anti-American regime in Iran. Washington not only lost a reliable ally but also feared initially that Soviet-backed forces might take advantage of the revolutionary turmoil in that country. Furthermore, shortly after the fall of the Shah, in February 1979, a border war broke out between South and North Yemen. As there was a pro-Soviet government in the South, this was considered yet another threat to US interests in the Gulf. Washington, in response, sent arms to North Yemen and stationed a carrier task force off the South Yemeni coast.[39] Finally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1980 confirmed to Washington that the Soviets were

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[38] Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy*, 104-106.
[39] John E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

threatening the Gulf. US President Jimmy Carter stated that "[t]he Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz."[40] The US response was what came to be known as the Carter Doctrine, announced by the President during his State of the Union address in January 1980: any "assault on the vital interests" of the US in the Gulf region by an outside force "will be repelled by the use of any means necessary including military force."[41] In order to implement this policy, the formation of a rapid deployment joint task force (RDF) was announced.

The Reagan administration, which came to power in 1981, further increased the US military presence in the region. The new policy, "strategic consensus," aimed to enlist the support of the regional countries, including Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, to cooperate with the US against "the common Soviet threat" in the Middle East. Thus, once again, due to the increasing threat perception of Washington from the Soviet Union in the Middle East, the strategic importance of Turkey increased as it was seen as a base for operations in the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean. These developments coincided with a military coup in Turkey on 12 September 1980. The army seemed to share the concerns and threat perceptions of the US in the region. A study published by the Turkish General Staff in 1980 referred to an "aggressive Soviet expansion strategy" and the necessity to demonstrate the "will and effort" to resist it.[42] As a result, security relations with the US deepened. The commander-in-chief of Allied Forces Southern Europe, Admiral William Crowe, explained Turkey's importance for the US's strategic interests in the context of the Middle East in the 1980s:

> Turkey sits on the flank of any Soviet thrust into Iran or the Gulf and is the only alliance nation which is Muslim and geographically located in the Middle East. No Western or Soviet planner can address the Middle East challenge without considering Turkey's orientation, terrain, airspace forces, and bases.[43]

Although Turkey shared the threat perception with the US, unlike in the 1950s, this time it acted more cautiously by refusing to commit itself formally to the defense of the Gulf through RDF but rather preferring to develop its bilateral ties with the USA by signing the Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement (DECA) on 29 March 1980.[44] In parallel, NATO also changed its guidelines for out-of-area operations in May 1982 and emphasized the strategic importance of the Middle East, which meant increasing the importance of Turkey as NATO's only member in the region.[45]

Therefore, during the Cold War, the Turkey–US alliance had a Middle Eastern dimension. The US interest in Turkey was partly related to preventing Soviet encroachment into this region, but it went beyond that as well. From Washington's point of view, Turkey's geopolitical significance was derived from its location, mainly geographically but also ideationally. After all, Turkey was the only Muslim nation in NATO. In this general context, Turkey-US relations in the Middle East shifted during the Cold War years, based on changes in the international and regional system (such as detente, the Second Cold War, or the Iranian

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[40] William S. Slany, *American Foreign Policy Basic Documents, 1977-1980* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1983), 55.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Mufti, *Daring and Caution*, 54.

[43] Ömer Karasapan, "Turkey and the US strategy in the Age of Glasnost," *Middle East Report* 19, no. 5 (1989): 8-9.

[44] Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, "Turkey's Security and the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 62, (1983): 157-175.

[45] Ibid.

Revolution) or due to domestic factors in the US (mainly the influence of the US Congress and the lobbies as well as the changes in the presidency) and Turkey (mainly political and economic changes, changes in governments and coup d'états').

Nevertheless, overall, during the Cold War, Turkey and the US largely shared similar perspectives and strategic outlooks on the Middle East. The 1950s represented the decade when Washington and Ankara saw mostly eye-to-eye in the region, and Turkey became instrumental in protecting the Western bloc's interests there. From the 1960s onwards, Turkish governments, sometimes unsuccessfully, tried to separate the Turkey-US alliance from Turkey's relations with the Middle East, whereas at other times, they tried to use Turkey's location "as a bridge between the West and the Middle East" as an asset to the Western bloc. General crises in the alliance were reflected in their bilateral relations in the Middle East. Thus, the overall dynamics of the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East were affected by systemic developments. However, these developments acquired a meaning through domestic politics and thus affected Turkey's foreign policy. The leaders' worldviews, in general, prioritized the overall Soviet threat and anti-communism throughout the Cold War years. Yet shifts in domestic politics, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, and the rise of smaller parties on the left and the right, and the polarization of politics had repercussions on Turkey's foreign policy and its relations with the US. Overall, due to changes in the international and regional system as well as domestic politics, Turkey's foreign policy had become more diversified. The real shifts in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East, however, began to increasingly appear after the end of the Cold War.

3. The recent period: Transformation of Turkey-US Relations in the Middle East

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity opened up a new era in Turkey's US relations. These developments meant, at least initially, the disappearance of international systemic logic in the relationship based on varying degrees of Soviet threat, a factor that also had a bearing on Turkey's relations with the US in the Middle East. Thus, bilateral relations started to be conditioned more on regional issues, including the Middle East, which not only provided new partnership opportunities but also increased divergence of interests.[46]

3.1. The 1990s: The emergence of strategic partnership with a twist

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a cluster of shocks due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991. The Gulf Crisis was initially seen as an opportunity by President Turgut Özal to increase Turkey's strategic importance for the US after the end of bipolarity. Thus, he engaged in intense dialogue with President George Bush and tried to play an active role in the US-led coalition.[47] Eventually, Turkey could only become part of the war effort indirectly as Özal faced opposition to a more direct involvement, even from his own party.

In any case, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the subsequent war against Iraq by the US-led coalition marked the beginning of a new era in regional politics. After the war, the US engaged in an effort to create a new Middle East order as part of a new global

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[46] Kemal Kirişçi, "US-Turkish relations: New Uncertainties in a Renewed Partnership," in *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power,* eds. Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişci, (Istanbul: Bogaziçi University Press, 2002), 169.

[47] Murat Yetkin, *İyi Günler Bay Başkan: Körfez Savaşı'nda Özal-Bush Görüşmeleri* [Good Days Mr. President: Özal-Bush Talks during the Gulf War] (Istanbul: Doğan Yayınları, 2022).

order which was characterized by unipolarity. The elements of this new regional order were going to be based first and foremost on an Arab-Israeli peace process and, thus, integration of Israel into the region, in parallel with multilateral regional processes that would bring a more economically integrated and peaceful region. It was also based on the dual containment policy, which aimed to contain both Iraq and Iran, that were seen as the spoilers of a new Middle East order. In the meantime, the 1990s witnessed extensive military involvement of the US in the region, not only to continue the post-war regime that was imposed on Iraq but also to militarily support the new regional order.

Turkey's position in this new order project was a mixed bag. Post-war developments in Iraq, especially the emergence of a region in northern Iraq which was no longer under the control of the central government but rather governed by two Iraqi Kurdish parties, created a sense of threat. Ankara was not only concerned about the PKK's use of this new region to launch attacks against Turkey but also about the possible division of Iraq and the emergence of a Kurdish state that could have an impact on Turkey's Kurdish problem. What is interesting about this new constellation is that despite its misgivings about US Iraq policy, Turkey continued to cooperate with Washington in sustaining the post-1991 war settlement in Iraq throughout the 1990s. Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey became crucial in the enforcement of the no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel. In return, Turkey obtained tacit US approval for its cross-border operations in pursuit of the PKK. However, the periodic renewal in the Turkish parliament of the mandate of Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), later renamed Operation Northern Watch (ONW), became a very contentious issue. On the one hand, it was an important card in the hands of Turkish policy-makers vis-a-vis the US and the Iraqi Kurdish groups. On the other hand, the Operation continued to stir debates as to its possible contribution to the establishment of a Kurdish state and the suspicions about the "real intentions of the US" in Iraq.[48] Despite several statements coming from Washington on the US commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq, several Turkish politicians, opinion-makers and even, at times, government officials publicly doubted US commitment to that policy, implicitly suggesting that US policy aimed to create an independent Kurdish state.[49] Thus, the Operation came to exemplify the complexity of the issues related to northern Iraq in Turkey-US relations.

From the mid-1990s, Turkey began on occasions to openly dissent from US policy in Iraq. Overall, Turkey's policy towards Iraq, in general, was largely influenced by lingering suspicions and disappointments. Turkey's Iraq policy emphasized the political unity and territorial integrity of Iraq, while Ankara was all the more concerned that the US policy of containment was undermining that objective. In order to deal with these challenges, Turkey used several diplomatic and military policy avenues. On the military front, Turkey launched several incursions in northern Iraq and eventually established a military contingent there. Diplomatically, Ankara aimed to get the US to support its objectives. Turkey also established ties with the Iraqi Kurdish groups while at the same time building its relations with the Turkmens, the Iraqi Turkic community, as a counterweight to Kurdish influence.[50]

Beyond the Iraqi issue, however, Turkey continued to cooperate closely with the US in its

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[48] Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Middle East in Turkey-USA Relations: Managing the Alliance," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013): 162-163.

[49] Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Iraq Policy: The War and Beyond," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 14, no. 2 (2006): 183-184.

[50] Ibid.

quest for a new regional order. Turkey supported the Arab-Israeli Peace Process and actively participated in the multilateral tracks. During this period, Turkey-Israel relations were first normalized, and then, they reached a level of strategic cooperation.[51] Although Turkey had its own interests in developing this relationship, it also fit well with the new US policy in the region. In fact, in the 1990s, Turkey and the US, together with Israel and, at times, Jordan engaged in several military exercises, especially in the eastern Mediterranean.[52]

Thus, the 1990s represented an important turning point in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. On the one hand, the two sides named their relationship as a "strategic partnership," thus elevating their bilateral relations. This was very important as the Turkish side was concerned about the future of bilateral relations and even the future of NATO in the context of the end of bipolarity. The strategic partnership meant that the two countries shared a similar strategic outlook, especially in regions around Turkey where there were significant transformations. They cooperated intensely in the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. On the surface, they also cooperated in the Middle East. However, due to the developments in northern Iraq, the Turkey-US strategic partnership in the Middle East became like a fruit that looked healthy from the outside but started to rot from the inside. In that sense, the 1990s represented the beginning of a new era in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East where, for the first time, their interests began to diverge and sow seeds of distrust, especially on the part of Turkey. Changing threat perceptions in Ankara now focused on the Middle East as the main source of threat to its territorial integrity, not only due to the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the region but also the US's involvement in Iraq. On the other hand, Turkey had several common interests with the US and was eager to cooperate with the only remaining superpower. This cooperation was also useful for signaling to Turkey's foes in the region, such as Iran and Syria. Finally, Turkey's cooperation with the US allowed Turkey room to maneuver in Iraq, establishing a limited military presence and engaging in hot pursuit of PKK terrorists. In any case, this decade ended with the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1998 with the help of the US, a development which eased the threat perception in Ankara somewhat.

Therefore, Turkey-US relations in the Middle East were affected by global and regional systemic shifts in the 1990s. However, how these systemic shifts were interpreted differed. While Özal perceived opportunities in the shifts and thus a permissive strategic environment, the coalition governments that governed after his death and, more importantly, the increasingly influential military saw threats and thus a highly restrictive regional context. More significantly, threat perception was not just about external threats; it was also linked to the domestic Kurdish problem. Thus, the construction of an ontological threat emanating from the Middle East and the US involvement in Iraq began to have tremendous repercussions for Turkey-US relations in the Middle East.

3.2. The 2000s: From a rocky start to an increasing cooperation

Regional politics underwent important changes due to the impact of the 11 September attacks on the US and following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. After including Iraq in its "war on terrorism," the Bush administration sought to convince Ankara to cooperate with it to open

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[51] Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement in the Post-Cold War Era," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (2000): 172-191.

[52] Ibid.

a northern front in its planned invasion of Iraq. The immediate response by Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit of the three-party coalition government was to raise the difficulties of such a war and its possible negative fallout for Turkey, mainly, destabilizing the Kurdish issue and worsening the economic situation in the country.[53] Soon, due to intra-coalition differences on several issues, the prime minister called for an early election. As a result, the newly established Justice and Development Party (AKP) formed a majority government that found itself in the midst of urgent issues related to the upcoming war in Iraq and the continuing pressure of the US.

The new government engaged in negotiations with the US, and eventually, three Memoranda of Understanding, dealing with military, economic and political affairs, were signed.[54] In the meantime, deep divisions about the war among and within political parties, including the AKP, as well as among the foreign and security policymakers and the public, continued. In the end, the motion to allow Turkey's participation in the war in terms of both sending forces and receiving foreign forces was rejected on 1 March 2003 in the parliament. Thus, Turkey blocked the creation of a northern front. Of the 533 parliamentarians in session, 264 voted for the motion, 250 voted against it, and 19 abstained, leaving the motion just three votes short of a constitutionally mandated full majority. In addition to all the deputies of the opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), 99 AKP deputies also voted against the motion.[55] The vote exposed the divisions within the AKP. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who still remained outside the parliament and yet, as the leader of the party, had extensive influence over the party and its constituency, avoided this subject publicly for a long time. Just two weeks earlier, in mid-February did he make an important speech in which he said that although morally he was against the war, they would do whatever was necessary, meaning cooperate with the US in this war, "in order to protect our national interests."[56] Yet this was not apparently enough to persuade all the AKP MPs.

The war started soon afterwards, and Ankara watched with dismay as the Iraqi Kurds became one of the US's main allies throughout the war in Iraq. Turkey-US relations, on the other hand, hit a new low after the so-called "hood incident." On 4 July 2003, 11 members of the Turkish Special Forces, part of the Turkish military contingent that had been stationed in northern Iraq since 1995, were apprehended by American troops in Sulaymaniyah, taken to Baghdad and finally freed a few days later. The whole ordeal, however, led to humiliation and anger in Turkey and created another crisis in Turkey-US relations. The Turkish chief of staff, Hilmi Özkök, said that the arrests led to the biggest crisis of confidence ever between Turkish and US forces. The joint Turkish–US fact-finding commission expressed regret that the unfortunate incident had occurred and decided to establish better coordination in Iraq. [57]

Thus, Iraq once again contributed to the problem of mistrust between the two allies. However, in due time, the AKP government was able to take several measures to repair its relations with Washington. In the Middle East context, this was done in two ways: First, as to the March 1 debacle, the government (and the US administration as well[58]) chose to blame

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[53] Altunışık, "Turkey's Iraq Policy," 185.

[54] Turkey was promised six billion dollars in aid in addition to some 26 billion dollars in loan guarantees. The number of troops that the US wished to deploy through Turkey had been reduced to some 60,000. It was also agreed that some 40,000 Turkish troops would be deployed in northern Iraq alongside the USA. See, Ibid., 189.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 190.

[58] US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, in an interview on Turkish television on 6 May 2003, said that the US was

"the old Turkey," particularly the military, for this crisis. Furthermore, starting in 2008, the government began to normalize Turkey's relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq by engaging the region politically and economically.[59] Thus, post-war political developments in Iraq as regards to the Kurdish region ceased to be a point of conflict with the US. Second, Turkey became highly active in two other policy elements of the "war on terrorism": namely, participation in the war in Afghanistan, which was a NATO operation based on Article 5, by sending non-combat forces. As NATO's only Muslim-majority country, Turkey's participation was appreciated by Washington.[60] Second, there was a declaration of support for and participation in the US policy of "forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East, which claimed to spread democracy in the region.[61] Overall, post-2003 regional politics were perceived as amenable by the AKP, which, for political, economic, and ideological reasons, was ready to play a more active role in regional politics. On the other hand, the US in the post-9/11 period favored Turkey, governed by a party regarded as post-Islamist, as a possible model for democracy in the Muslim world. Therefore, although the 2000s started with a clash between Turkey and the US over Iraq, eventually, global, regional, and domestic factors aligned to further their bilateral cooperation in the region.

In sum, the 2000s were again characterized by significant shifts in the global system after the 9/11 attacks on the US, and the regional system after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. This period also coincided with an important domestic shift. Thus, whether the developments in the international and regional system were seen as permissive or restrictive were very much dependent on domestic factors, particularly the leadership and its political and ideological outlook. The AKP, which was formed by a nucleus cadre that split from Turkey's Islamist movement, the *National Outlook*, made foreign policy one of the cornerstones of its ideology and practice, and the Middle East has had a special place in the party's quest to redefine and re-constitute Turkey's domestic and international identity. This new vision of Turkey's foreign policy toward the Middle East region started with criticism of traditional policy and its historical narrative. The "old era" republican foreign policy toward the Middle East was characterized by Turkey's turning its back on the region, which signaled an ideological choice that favored a rupture with Turkey's past. Thus, from the beginning, the worldview of the leadership of the AKP favored Turkey's active and independent involvement in the Middle East. However, in its quest to consolidate itself domestically in its first decade, it used the shifting global system after 9/11 and the regional system post-2003 to strengthen its relations with the US in general and in the Middle East in particular.

3.3. Since the 2010s: Becoming Rivals in the Middle East?

The 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings were a major turning point for the whole region as they opened the way for intense competition among the regional powers vying for influence. Soon, the region became rife with civil wars, intensification of violence as well as military interventions by regional and international actors, and multi-layered and complex conflicts

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disappointed with the Turkish military for not playing "a strong leadership role." See, Çağrı Erhan and Efe Sıvış, "Determinants of Turkish-American Relations and Prospects for the Future," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 100.

[59] Özlem Kayhan Pusane, "The Role of Context in Desecuritization: Turkish Foreign Policy towards Northern Iraq (2008-2017)," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 392-413.

[60] Jim Garamone, "NATO Deputy Stresses Alliance's Dedication to Turkey," *U.S. Department of Defense*, January 25, 2018, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1424345/

[61] Çağrı Erhan, "Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative and Beyond," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2005): 153-170.

where states and non-state actors engage in a myriad of shifting alliances.

These post-uprising developments exposed Turkey's limitations in its quest for regional leadership and its ability to influence events to its liking in the Middle East. Especially after the 2013 toppling of President Morsi in Egypt and the rapid evolution of the Syrian uprising into a prolonged civil war involving regional and extra-regional powers, Turkish political elites started to perceive developments in the Middle East as largely presenting new threats to Turkey's national security and regional aspirations. In the process, Turkey became directly involved, including militarily, in ongoing civil wars in Syria and Libya.

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, Turkey and the US cooperated in their positions of supporting the uprisings, although by then, the US was already redefining its relations with the Middle East and thus was not spearheading such policies. Yet, the leaders of both countries called Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to step down. Despite their initial reluctance, Turkey and the US were part of the NATO intervention in Libya. More significantly, they cooperated in the context of Syria, where both countries engaged in diplomatic and military pressures and assisted the opposition to garner a regime change.[62]

Yet, the level of cooperation started to change in 2013-2014 with the increasing radicalization of the opposition in Syria and eventually with the rise of ISIS. After that, the US began to focus its activities in Syria on defeating ISIS by forming an international coalition. The AKP government was slow to join this coalition and continued to focus its attention on the overthrowing of Bashar Assad. In the meantime, the US started to rely on the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG,) as part of the Obama Administration's doctrine of relying on surrogate warfare[63] to fight the war against ISIS on the ground. Thus, the PYD/YPG, a group that has organic links with the PKK, became an ally of the US, starting to receive military assistance in the form of training and arms. Furthermore, through its war with ISIS, the YPG expanded into new territory and thus succeeded in controlling a contiguous region in northern parts of Syria. Turkey has failed to convince the US to cut its support for and cooperation with the PYD/YPG and thus has been facing the reality of a US-supported Kurdish entity with links to the PKK along its southern border.

All this coincided with significant domestic developments in Turkey, such as the collapse of the Kurdish peace process (2014–2015) and the failed coup attempt in July 2016. After the failed coup, there have been clear shifts in AKP alliances, with the formation of the "People's Alliance" with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and changing of the political system to a presidential one with extensive powers given to the president.

As a result, domestic actors' perceptions of global and regional politics have begun to evolve in recent years. The AKP elite believes that in a transforming global context where the old-world order is disappearing, and a new post-Western order is emerging, Turkey cannot just rely on traditional alliances to pursue its national interests. This is especially true for the Middle East, where in Syria, Turkey perceives the US as not only threatening its interests but also its territorial integrity by supporting and arming the PYD/YPG. Therefore, in the context of transforming global order and the perceived US retrenchment from the region, as well as its alliance with the PYD/YPG, possibilities of Turkey-US alignment in the region have

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[62] Christopher Philips, "Turkey's Syria Problem," *Public Policy Research* 9, no. 2 (2012): 137-140.

[63] Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: the Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97-113.

become dimmer. Furthermore, as Turkey has started to launch several military operations into northern Syria and created a zone of military presence there, even the possibility of confrontation with the US increased. This was demonstrated by the shooting down in 2023 of an armed Turkish drones by the US in Syria, which allegedly came close to its troops.[64] Although the Turkish government tried to downplay the event to some extent, the tensions again increased after the Biden administration's statement that Turkey's military actions in northern Syria posed a threat to the security of both the region and the US. In response, President Erdoğan speaking at the Closing Ceremony of the Turkey-Africa Business and Economic Forum held at the Istanbul Congress Center said:

> America's activities in this country, with the PKK's extensions in Syria, are an extraordinary threat to Turkey's national security. Are we not together with America in NATO? We are together. But did America shoot down our Armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)? It did. How are we together with you in NATO? How can you do such a thing? There is a security problem between us. This statement is incompatible with the spirit of alliance and strategic partnership and encourages terrorist organizations to try to divide Syria.[65]

The divergences between Turkey and the US in the Middle East have recently expanded to the Palestinian conflict. Although this conflict has generally led to ups and downs in Turkey-Israel relations, the government chose to criticize the US directly in terms of its policy towards the ongoing Gaza war. Erdoğan in his speech at the Youth Foundation of Turkey (TÜGVA) Organization Meeting held at Beştepe National Congress and Culture Center asked, "Is it better for a country like America to establish peace or to add fuel to the fire?" Reacting to the US sending an aircraft carrier, Erdoğan said, "Where is America, where is Israel-Palestine? What are you doing there?"[66] Thus, the divergences between the two countries in the Middle East seem to be widening.

All this does not mean that there has been no cooperation between the two countries in the Middle East in recent years. For instance, despite its initial hesitance, Turkey joined more actively in the US-led coalition against ISIS and allowed the US' use of İncirlik airbase.[67] In fact, Turkey-US relations continue within the context of NATO. Turkey participates in the NATO mission in Iraq.[68] In November 2023, US B1-B Lancer bombers were deployed to İncirlik airbase as a deterrence against the widening of the Gaza war.[69] Yet, considering the history of Turkey-US relations in the context of the Middle East, it is safe to argue that divergences have largely dominated the bilateral relations. For the first time, both sides clearly framed each other as undermining their security objectives and even posing a threat to each other. Moreover, their worldviews began to diverge increasingly. These shifts in the

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[64] "US shoot down Turkish drone flying near its troops in Syria," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/05/us-shoots-down-turkish-drone-syria

[65] "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: ABD ile aramızda güvenlik sorunu var [President Erdogan: There is a security problem between us and the US]," *NTV*, October 13, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-abd-ile-aramizda-guvenlik-sorunu-var,Qzwhtx5GPEiX7PoGpPAAvg

[66] "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan ABD'ye uçak gemisi tepkisi: Ne işin var senin orada? [President Erdoğan reacts to the US aircraft carrier: What are you doing there?]," *Oksijen*, October 12, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. https://gazeteoksijen.com/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-abdye-ucak-gemisi-tepkisi-ne-isin-var-senin-orada-191464

[67] Jared Szuba, "US deploys B-1b bombers Turkey for 'long-planned' exercise amid Gaza war," *Al-Monitor*, November 1, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/11/us-deploys-b-1b-bombers-turkey-long-planned-exercise-amid-gaza-war

[68] Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Promoting Turkey-EU Cooperation in Iraq: Challenges and Prospects," in *Tackling Uncertainty: Turkish-EU Foreign Policy Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Andrea Dessi, Senem Aydın-Düzgit, and Daniela Huber (Rome: IAI, 2022), 52.

[69] "U.S. Relations with Turkey (Türkiye)," *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs*, January 9, 2023, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-turkey/

bilateral alliance occurred in the context of transforming global and regional contexts and were influenced by domestic developments in both countries. While the transformation of the AKP and its alliances had an impact on bilateral relations, the change of administrations in the US contributed to the trajectory of how the US approached Turkey's interests.

Turkey-US relations are currently facing new tests in the face of significant regional transformations and a change of presidency in the US. The overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 by the Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) and other opposition forces has created a new reality on the ground in Syria. Turkey as a country that has consistently supported the opposition groups in Syria since the uprisings there, finds itself in an advantageous position in terms of its influence in the post-Assad era. This together with Trump's presidency in the US, could reduce Turkey's threat perception from Syria and open new opportunities for cooperation with Washington. Thus, although the situation in Syria and beyond in the region remains highly uncertain, we may be on the cusp of a new era in Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. Given the context of global change and both Trump's and Erdoğan's preference for transactionalism in foreign policy, these new developments may not probably return the relationship to its better days, but it could open more cooperation in the Middle East.

5. Conclusions

The Middle East has always been part of Turkey-US relations. However, overall, Turkey has adopted an ambiguous position on this as it tried to use its Middle East policy and identity as an asset in its relations with the US while at the same time, as an aspiring regional power, it always developed distinct interests in the region. In that regard, the region increasingly became a source of contention as Turkey's quest for being a significant power in the region increased, and the perception of threats emanating from the region became related to its territorial integrity. These shifts were affected by transformations in the global and regional orders as well as in the domestic realm.

Despite the asymmetrical power relations, as a regional power, even in the 1950s, when Turkey and the US had a common strategic outlook, shared threat perceptions and similar worldviews, Turkey also pursued its own agenda. Yet these divergences did not cause major problems during the Cold War and were managed to some extent after the end of the Cold War. At once, this is generally seen as part of alliance politics. As Morrow[70] argued, "allies must share both harmonious and divergent interests. Without the latter, an alliance would be unnecessary." These two allies have largely shared common threat perceptions and worldviews. However, beginning with the Gulf War, trust eroded between them and their interests on significant issues started to diverge despite episodes of cooperation on several other issues. What is happening in the last years is that not only do their threat perceptions diverge, but Turkey perceives a threat from the US, and its threat perception is framed in an ontological security narrative that severely undermines bilateral relations. In addition, their worldviews are also diverging. Domestic political changes are affecting how the two countries view the world and their places in it. The changes in AKP rule, increasingly becoming personalistic and less institutionalized, have been affecting Turkey's foreign policy. A significant result has been the weakening of Turkey's ties with its allies in the West.

The transformation of Turkey-US relations has demonstrated the utility of focusing

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[70] James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 906.

on both the international systemic and domestic factors. The NCR's emphasis on the international and regional strategic environment and going beyond focusing on polarity have been significant in that regard. Rather than polarity, the existence of permissive and restrictive strategic environments at the international and regional levels had a significant impact on Turkey-US relations in the Middle East. Yet, the way domestic political elites perceived these environments was equally significant and that was largely determined by their political aims and overall worldviews. In that way, the interrelatedness of external and internal defies the explanations based on such a distinction in explaining alliance politics.[71]

What does all this mean to a complex alliance with two dimensions? This presents another difficulty of explanation. As the bilateral dimension in the Middle East has deteriorated, Turkey is still a member of NATO. Furthermore, although there are problems in that context as well, Turkey seems to think that the benefits of being a member of NATO are still relevant.[72] This juxtaposition seems to bring US-Turkey relations into a new phase. As Goh and Sahashi[73] argue, alliances can be in three forms: threat-based, ontological, and transactional. As the two elements in the Turkey-US alliance in the Middle East have eroded, the transactional[74] element seems to prevail. The question then is whether and to what extent alliances endure if they just rely on transactionalism. Furthermore, how might the end of a bilateral alliance in one region reflect on the general characteristics of an alliance? The answers to these questions will have repercussions not only for Turkish-American relations but also for alliance theory. The case of the Turkey-US alliance in the context of the Middle East raises important questions for further research beyond this case on the issue of focusing on alliance change, rather than only alliance formation and termination. It further demonstrates the need for further research on the issue of transactionalism in international politics and whether and how that is linked with transformations in the international system as well as domestic politics.

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[71] Although Stephen David's omnibalancing approach considers domestic threat perceptions in alliance making, it does not deal with alliance change and the cases where multilateral alliances continue to survive while bilateral alliances erode. See, Stephen R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 233-256.

[72] Didem Buhari Gülmez, "The Resilience of the US-Turkey Alliance: Divergent Threat Perceptions and Worldviews," *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020): 475-492.

[73] Goh and Shashi, "Worldviews on the United States," 371-383.

[74] İlter Turan, "Avoiding A Transactional Framework for US-Turkey Relations," *GMF Insights on Turkey*, December 6, 2017, accessed date November, 2023. https://www.gmfus.org/news/avoiding-transactional-framework-us-turkey-relations

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