

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Turkey is no stranger to cold wars. Over the past decade, Turkey's foreign policy has been directed toward breaking its pattern of crisis-prone relations, with some real success in the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East. The end of large-scale competition in Eurasia, alongside Turkey's economic dynamism and expanding regional commerce, created the conditions for a "zero-problems" approach to the neighborhood. But these favorable conditions are disappearing rapidly, and Ankara faces some troubling cold wars, new and old, that will shape the strategic environment and the nature of Turkey's security partnerships.

## Turkey's Cold Wars

by Ian O. Lesser

Turkey is no stranger to cold wars. The centuries-long competition between the Ottoman and Spanish empires has been described by Adda Bozeman as "the first cold war." For much of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the relationship between Russia and Turkey alternated between cold war and outright conflict. In the wake of World War II, Turkey was a front line state in the defining strategic competition between East and West. In a narrower sense, the prevailing détente in the Aegean has pushed to the margins a longstanding cold war between Athens and Ankara. More than most international actors, Turkey's strategic outlook has been shaped by the experience of latent, indirect, or proxy conflicts — cold wars that can turn "hot."

Over the past decade, Turkey's foreign policy has been directed toward breaking this pattern of crisis-prone relations, with some real success in the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East. The end of large-scale competition in Eurasia, alongside Turkey's economic dynamism and expanding regional commerce, created the conditions for a "zero-problems" approach to the neighborhood. This was a posture admirably suited to its

times. But these favorable conditions are disappearing rapidly, and Ankara faces some troubling cold wars, new and old, that will shape the strategic environment and the nature of Turkey's security partnerships.

### Chaos and Competition in Turkey's Near Abroad

Turkey is highly exposed to spillovers from the deepening conflict in Syria and its regional consequences. This is not a temporary problem. It is quite possible that Syria will remain a zone of chaos for the next decade or more; a sort of larger-scale Lebanon, with a durable capacity for destabilization across a wide area. In addition to the direct effects of political and sectarian conflict in Syria, the deteriorating situation there has spurred a proxy war, with various armed groups backed by Iran, Egypt, the Gulf monarchies, and Turkey itself. Russia, too, is part of this equation, and Turkey's forward-leaning posture in Syria may well complicate otherwise positive relations between Moscow and Ankara. To the extent that Europe and the United States become more heavily engaged in support of armed opposition groups, even short of direct interven-



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tion, the proxy dimension of the war in Syria will take on new significance. The U.S. commitment to provide further non-lethal assistance to the Free Syrian Army, announced at the February 2013 “Friends of Syria” conference in Rome, points to more active, if still arms-length Western involvement, and the need for closer cooperation with Ankara. In the meantime, leading Turkish population centers are within range of Syrian ballistic missiles, a tangible risk given the level of animosity between Damascus and Ankara. In this context, the deployment of additional Dutch, German, and U.S. Patriot air defense batteries to Turkey is more than a symbolic act.

Proxy warfare — a characteristic of earlier cold wars — is likely to be one of the defining features of Turkey’s strategic environment in the years to come. Turkey’s principal point of exposure in this context continues to be the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) insurgency and PKK bases in Syria and Northern Iraq. But this is not the only threat from this quarter. Hezbollah, and a range of other non-state actors, will find fertile ground in the post-revolutionary chaos affecting the Middle East and North Africa. Sectarian cleavages, above all the Sunni-Shia confrontation reaching from the Mediterranean to Pakistan, could draw Turkey into new regional entanglements. These looming proxy wars only reinforce the significance of a possible disengagement agreement between the PKK and the Turkish authorities, a development that could take a leading point of Syrian and Iranian leverage off the table. Similarly, in Iraq, Ankara and the Kurdish Regional Government will continue to face a security environment shaped in large measure by proxies backed by Iran and its Gulf competitors. Détente on the Kurdish front will greatly reduce Ankara’s exposure.

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Turkey may not be in the front rank when it comes to worry over Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Yet the potential for a new nuclear armed state on Turkey’s borders will take on very different meaning if Ankara is engaged in a proxy war with Iran in Syria and perhaps elsewhere. Iran’s clients are likely to behave in different and more unpredictable ways under the umbrella of a nuclear or even a threshold nuclear state. Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, if further developed, will inevitably influence the future geopolitical relationship between Tehran and Ankara. The implications for Turkey of a nuclear Iran will be much more troubling against a backdrop of regional instability and conflict.

Turkey’s frosty relationship with Israel constitutes a cold war of a different kind. Both sides are engaged in a war of words, but also recognize the dangers of allowing sharp political differences to threaten crisis management. In reality, Israel and Turkey share a number of strategic concerns, from counter-terrorism to the containment of Iran, and an interest in keeping the United States engaged in the Middle East. Trade relations continue to thrive despite the political stand-off. But the prevailing mutual mistrust is impeding some important initiatives, including cooperation in the development of new energy finds in the region and outreach to partners in NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue. Ankara’s opposition to working with Israel in the Mediterranean Dialogue has had the unintended consequence of keeping the Alliance from moving ahead on security sector reform, border security, and other projects from Morocco to Jordan. Realistically, there is little prospect for a return to a close Turkish-Israeli “strategic” relationship. Regional conditions and domestic politics in both countries have evolved in ways that may make this unlikely. Still, a stable and less crisis prone relationship is within reach. This is one cold war that can be defused.

Even as Turkey-EU relations show some signs of improvement, the Cyprus dispute — yet another example of cold war — continues to impose substantial opportunity costs on Turkey and its transatlantic partners. More of a political than a security flashpoint, the lack of a settlement on Cyprus hobbles regional cooperation on energy, migration, and the environment. It also stands in the way of badly needed EU-NATO cooperation at a time of resource constraints and keeps Turkey out of the European club. The change of government in Cyprus could offer an opportunity



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for a new, serious effort at resolution, and open the way for further Cypriot integration in Euroatlantic institutions (the new president of Cyprus is keen to join NATO's Partnership for Peace). The political, financial, and security incentives for this are probably stronger than they have been since the failed referendum on the Annan Plan in 2004. Washington and Brussels are hardly in the mood for demanding new diplomatic initiatives, but this could be the moment to redouble international efforts on Cyprus that could pay enormous dividends for strategy in Europe and the Middle East.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, Turkey is exposed to the consequences of frozen and not-so-frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus, including the dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which poses an ongoing risk of "hot" war. These frictions can have direct effects on Turkish security, from refugee flows to criminality. They also condition the prospects for détente between Turkey and Armenia — another unresolved cold war — and complicate Ankara's political relations with key international partners, above all the United States and France.

### Global Shifts, Local Consequences

In a strategic environment characterized by multiple cold wars, Turkish observers cast a wary eye on the level and character of U.S. engagement in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Historic fears of U.S. interference compete with concerns about Washington's disengagement in the Turkish calculus. In practical terms, there is little to suggest that the United States is disengaging from the region. The United States maintains the ability to deploy substantial forces to the Eastern Mediterranean, even if the standing level of U.S. presence is far from what it was in past decades. Indeed, some aspects of the U.S. defense posture have their

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center of gravity in this space, including the new NATO missile defense architecture, which is largely afloat in the Mediterranean. From Italy to Turkey, the region has a concentration of U.S. manned and unmanned air assets. The United States' own cold war with Iran, and commitments to Israeli security, are likely to remain as anchors of U.S. security engagement.

Will the Middle East as a whole continue to hold such a dominant place in U.S. strategy over the next decade? From a Turkish perspective, this cannot be taken for granted. A combination of shrinking U.S. reliance on energy imports from outside North America and the Atlantic, and disillusionment with the Middle East peace process and the course of post-revolutionary change in the Arab world, could spell declining political support for the traditional level of engagement. To be clear, this hardly argues for U.S. *disengagement* from the Middle East. The United States will retain a stake in the stability of Gulf oil exports to world markets, and there is a tradition of second-term administrations rediscovering the peace process. But broader trends suggest a world in which Turkey, along with key European countries, may need to take on more prominent security roles in the Middle East and North Africa, and especially around the Mediterranean. Indeed, this is already a good description of what has happened in Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Mali, and mirrors changes in the Balkans over the past decade.

Behind this looms a larger and more consequential open question about the strategic relationship between the United States and China. For all the exaggerated rhetoric about a U.S. "pivot to Asia," in defense planning terms at least, the shift is very real and has been underway for some time. Should developments in Asia take a sharper turn, the downgrading of the Middle East as a strategic concern will accelerate. Under these conditions, Ankara may need to hedge against a future with "less United States" in its neighborhood. This could take the form of closer security cooperation with Europe, or various illusory Eurasian alternatives (Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's recent musings about the possibility of Turkish membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are oddly reminiscent of past flirtations with Eurasian strategy by some Turkish



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military officials). There is always the Turkish temptation to act as a “lone wolf,” as Soli Ozel reminds us in his analyses.<sup>1</sup>

### Dealing With Cold Wars, New and Old

After a decade of relatively benign conditions, the sharp deterioration of the security environment in Turkey's neighborhood, together with changes afoot in Europe and the United States, will pose new challenges for Turkish policy. The evolving environment will increase rather than decrease Turkey's need for strategic reassurance. The proliferation of cold wars, new and old, regional and potentially global, suggests that Ankara and its transatlantic partners would be well advised to take some of these frictions off the table. Cyprus, Israel, and the Kurdish insurgency are prime examples of cases where progress toward resolution would pay dividends on multiple fronts. For Turkey's broader strategy of political and economic diversification to be sustainable, Ankara needs to hedge against rising security risks on its borders and further afield. The interdependence of Turkish and transatlantic strategic interests is more obvious than ever. So, too, is the shared interest in potentially transforming *détentes*.

<sup>1</sup> “Of Not Being a Lone Wolf: Geography, Domestic Plays, and Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East” in *Powder Keg in the Middle East: The Struggle for Gulf Security*, by Geoffrey Kemp and Janice Gross Stein, Rowman & Littlefield, 1995.

### About the Author

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