

House Foreign Affairs Committee
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Bridging the Gap: Turkey Between East and West

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Chairman Self, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The government of Turkey has become a headache for U.S. policymakers. If Ankara maintains its current trajectory, that headache will soon become a migraine.

Once hailed as a rare “Islamic Democracy” by Washington¹ and celebrated as a potential governance model for the Middle East, the Turkish government under strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan is in no way a model for the Middle East today. Indeed, Turkey’s governance model is largely indistinguishable from the regimes of Arab strongmen. More worryingly, Turkey has strayed from its alliance with the United States. The country behaves too often like an adversary, pursuing malign domestic and foreign policies that fly in the face of U.S. interests. Some might posit that Ankara has employed a hedging strategy toward the West. I view it differently. Turkey has systematically tested American patience for more than a decade, and it has yet to pay a significant price for doing so.

There are five key concepts that American policymakers must understand if we are to properly assess and address the challenge from Turkey.

First, Turkey has become a state sponsor of terrorism. It may not appear on the State Department list right now. But it should. Ankara has a long and established track record for supporting Middle East terrorist groups and rogue states.² The Erdogan government has been unabashed in backing terror groups like Hamas, al-Qaeda, and even the Islamic State.

Second, Turkey has ambitions of regional if not global dominance. Erdoğan has made no secret of his irredentist and Neo-Ottoman aim.³ To put it plainly, he seeks to make Turkey great again. Ankara is actively working to expand its traditional sphere of influence in the Middle East and beyond, and it is doing so at the expense of the stability of our allies — and even the United States.

Third, Turkey threatens the cohesion and security of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁴ Turkey has adopted policies that support NATO adversaries like Russia. But some of Ankara’s other policies simply fly in the face of the values of this important alliance.

Fourth and relatedly, Turkey plays a duplicitous role in Russia’s war against Ukraine.⁵ This must not continue.

¹ David Dolan, “Vice President Biden chides Turkey over freedom of expression,” *Reuters*, January 22, 2016. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us-politics/vice-president-biden-chides-turkey-over-freedom-of-expression-idUSKCN0V01PB>)

² “Israel Foils Hamas Terror Attack Directed by Turkey,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, July 21, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/07/21/israel-foils-hamas-terror-attack-directed-by-turkey>)

³ Abdul Rasool Syed, “Erdogan: A Man Obsessed With Neo-Ottomanism,” *Modern Diplomacy*, November 9, 2020. (<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/11/09/erdogan-a-man-obsessed-with-neo-ottomanism>)

⁴ Michael Crowley and Steven Erlanger, “For NATO, Turkey Is a Disruptive Ally,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/30/us/politics/turkey-nato-russia.html>)

⁵ Sinan Ciddi and Sophia Epley, “Washington Should Demand Turkey Donate its S-400 Missiles to Ukraine and the U.S.,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 25, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/25/washington-should-demand-turkey-donate-its-s-400-missiles-to-ukraine-and-the-u-s>)

Finally, Turkey's domestic politics portray a country that is gripped by the autocratic rule of Erdogan. The country today is an outlier among our democratic allies and partners.

My testimony will explore these five problems. In the conclusion, this testimony offers policy prescriptions to address these challenges.

Terrorism Support

Turkey has garnered significant attention since the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria late last year. This is because Turkey is the primary power behind the rise of the al-Qaeda affiliate group known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. A few short years ago, HTS went by the name of Jabhat al-Nusra, which was designated by the United States as a terrorist group on account of its violent, jihadist track record and its partnership with the Islamic State. The group changed its name in a bid to make a break from its dark past.⁶

Turkey's backing of this group is not new. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Turkey provided support to several jihadi groups fighting to bring down the Assad regime.⁷ This was clear early on to American officials serving in the region. One such official told me in 2012 that U.S. agencies confronted the government in Ankara, which did not deny its support for violent jihadis. Rather, the Turks acknowledged their proxy campaign to bring down the Assad regime with violent non-state actors and promised to clean up the problem after the Assad regime fell. Assad, as we all know, didn't fall for 14 years. This contributed to a jihadi problem in Syria that American policymakers must now confront. Ahmad al-Sharaa (aka Abu Mohammed al-Jolani), the leader of HTS, is now the head of state in Syria. Ankara is keen to promote al-Sharaa's government as a moderate entity. It may be pragmatic for now, but whether it stays moderate remains to be seen. HTS has a brutal history that must not be ignored.⁸ The closest analog there is to this scenario — a designated terrorist group taking over a country — is the Taliban. And that has not worked out well in Afghanistan, to put it mildly.⁹

But Turkey's support for HTS is not an anomaly. As early as 2012, known terrorist organizations became increasingly reliant on Turkey's permissive border policies for their ability to operate, if not their survival.¹⁰ In the early stages of the Syrian civil war, officials from the Free Syrian Army (later renamed the Syrian National Army) began alerting Washington that known terrorists were crossing

⁶ Mattisan Rowan, "Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham," *Wilson Center*, April 24, 2017. (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/al-qaedas-latest-rebranding-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>)

⁷ "10 Things to Know About Turkey's Interventions and Influence in Syria," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 24, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/02/24/10-things-to-know-about-turkeys-interventions-and-influence-in-syria>)

⁸ Bill Roggio, "Hayat Tahrir al Sham's terror network in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 12, 2024. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/12/hayat-tahrir-al-shams-terror-network-in-syria.php>)

⁹ Divyabharthi Baradhan, "UN expert expresses concern over worsening human rights situation in Afghanistan," *Jurist*, February 28, 2025. (<https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/02/un-expert-expresses-concern-over-worsening-human-rights-situation-in-afghanistan>)

¹⁰ Sinan Ciddi and Sophia Epley, "Turkey and HTS: A New Era of Extremism in Syria?" *19FortyFive*, January 15, 2025. (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2025/01/turkey-and-hts-a-new-era-of-extremism-in-syria>)

freely between Syria and Turkey and that Turkish border guards looked the other way.¹¹ This was not passive complicity. A 2012 report revealed that Ankara joined forces with Qatar and Saudi Arabia to establish a covert operations center to enable jihadi assaults on the Assad regime.¹²

Ankara's sympathizers are often quick to note that Turkey's policies in Syria are driven by its fears of Kurdish separatism.¹³ As the Syrian civil war raged on, Ankara became increasingly alarmed by the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish zone in northern Syria led by the Syrian Democratic Forces. The SDF became the primary U.S. partner in the fight against the Islamic State.¹⁴ For Ankara, the SDF was nothing more than an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist group designated by Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. We often hear from Turkish mouthpieces that Ankara's reckless policies in Syria are driven by this friction.

First, let us acknowledge that even legitimate political grievances do not grant American allies the right to support jihadi violence. But the problem is bigger than Syria. Turkey's fingerprints can be found in Lebanon. Just last month, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar told a visiting delegation of U.S. senators and the deputy Middle East special envoy that Turkey is aiding Iran to smuggle funds to Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁵ One year earlier, in January 2024, the United States imposed sanctions on three entities and one individual based in Turkey and Lebanon for providing "critical financial support" to a financial network used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and Lebanon's Hezbollah.¹⁶ Several other Turkish-based entities have earned sanctions or other punitive actions by the U.S. government in recent years for similar reasons.

But it doesn't end there. Ankara is a leading patron of Hamas, the terrorist group that committed the October 7 massacre in 2023. Erdogan's support for Hamas began in 2006, if not earlier.¹⁷ Erdogan shocked Western leaders when he invited top Hamas leaders to Ankara just weeks after privately assuring them he would not do so.¹⁸ Since then, Turkey has openly backed the terror group, providing political cover and financial support. It is the only country in NATO that openly embraces Hamas as a "resistance" movement.

¹¹ Lauren Frayer, "Who's been funding the HTS rebels now in control of Syria?" *National Public Radio*, December 20, 2024. (<https://www.npr.org/2024/12/19/nx-s1-5232809/syria-hts-funding>)

¹² Jonathan Schanzer and Merve Tahiroglu, "Bordering on Terrorism: Turkey's Syria Policy and the Rise of the Islamic State," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 19, 2014. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2014/11/19/bordering-on-terrorism>)

¹³ Sinan Ciddi and Sophia Epley, "Turkey and HTS: A New Era of Extremism in Syria?" *19FortyFive*, January 15, 2025. (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2025/01/turkey-and-hts-a-new-era-of-extremism-in-syria>)

¹⁴ Henri J. Barkey, "What Role Is Turkey Playing in Syria's Civil War?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 6, 2024. (<https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-role-turkey-playing-syrias-civil-war>)

¹⁵ "Israel accuses Turkey of helping Iran get cash to Hezbollah," *Iran International*, February 17, 2025. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202502172540>)

¹⁶ "US targets Iranian, Hezbollah financial network with sanctions," *Reuters*, January 31, 2024. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-targets-iranian-hezbollah-financial-network-with-sanctions-2024-01-31>)

¹⁷ Ece Goksedef, "What is behind Turkey's staunch support for Hamas in Gaza?" *BBC (UK)*, January 2, 2024. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67861266>)

¹⁸ "Hamas Visit to Turkey Deepens Secular-Islamist Rift," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, March 14, 2006. (<https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-visit-turkey-deepens-secular-islamist-rift>)

By 2011, Palestinian sources alleged that Erdogan earmarked \$300 million to Hamas.¹⁹ While never confirmed, \$300 million would have constituted nearly half of Hamas's budget at the time. After the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap of 2011, scores of Hamas operatives were deported to Turkey, including Saleh al-Aroui, one of the group's most dangerous terrorist operatives.²⁰ The group increasingly sought to establish a base of operations in Turkey. Erdogan welcomed both visiting Hamas delegations and Turkey-based operatives with open arms, saying "I don't see Hamas as a terror organization, Hamas is a political party."²¹ Erdogan's position did not waver after Aroui boasted before a large crowd in Turkey that he ordered the killing of three Israeli teens.²² That triple murder led inexorably to the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas.

Erdogan's support of Hamas has not flagged since, even after the October 7 attacks. In fact, the Turkish strongman doubled down on his support after the war began. He declared, "Hamas is not a terrorist organization, it is a liberation group, 'mujahideen' waging a battle to protect its lands and people."²³ As if to underscore this, Hamas Political Chief Ismail Haniyeh met with Erdogan in Istanbul just months before he was killed by Israel in Tehran on July 31, 2024.²⁴ According to reports at the time, the two discussed formally relocating Hamas's political headquarters from Qatar to Turkey.²⁵

In December 2024, American legislators received a classified briefing about Turkey's deep and growing ties to Hamas.²⁶ For the members who received this briefing, one thing should have become clear: Erdogan has invested more than 15 years legitimizing, funding, and empowering Hamas. This has positioned Turkey as an indispensable patron of the terrorist organization.

A key component of that patronage is Turkey's facilitation of Hamas's global financial operations in the country. Numerous U.S. sanctions designations underscore this troubling dynamic. Trend GYO, a Turkish construction conglomerate with an estimated worth of \$500 million, was designated by the United States in 2022 for "generat[ing] revenue for the terrorist group through the management

¹⁹ Jonathan Schanzer, "Hamas for Sale?" *The Weekly Standard*, December 21, 2011. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2011/12/21/hamas-for-sale>)

²⁰ Jonathan Schanzer, "Thorn in the Side," *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2013. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/17/thorn-in-the-side>)

²¹ Tovah Lazaroff, "Erdogan: 'Hamas is not a terrorist organization,'" *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), May 13, 2011. (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/erdogan-hamas-is-not-a-terrorist-organization>)

²² "Hamas admits kidnapping 3 Israeli teens in West Bank," *CBS News*, August 21, 2014. (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hamas-admits-kidnapping-3-israeli-teens-in-west-bank>)

²³ "Turkey's Erdogan: Hamas aren't terrorists, they're a liberation group," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), October 25, 2023. (<https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-770084>)

²⁴ Abby Sewell, "Hamas' top political leader is killed in Iran in strike that risks triggering all-out regional war," *Associated Press*, July 31, 2024. (<https://apnews.com/article/iran-hamas-israel-30968a7acb31cd8b259de9650014b779>)

²⁵ "Hamas Chief Meets Turkish President, Considers Move from Qatar to Turkey," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 22, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/04/22/hamas-chief-meets-turkish-president-considers-move-from-qatar-to-turkey>)

²⁶ Office of Rep. Josh Gottheimer, Press Release, "Gottheimer, Goldman, Bilirakis, & Malliotakis Lead Bipartisan Letter with 39 Members of Congress To Blinken and Haines Regarding Turkey Harboring of Hamas leaders," November 22, 2024. (<https://gottheimer.house.gov/posts/release-gottheimer-goldman-bilirakis-malliotakis-lead-bipartisan-letter-with-39-members-of-congress-to-blinken-and-haines-regarding-turkey-harboring-of-hamas-leaders>)

of an international investment portfolio.”²⁷ The scheme was rather simple: Hamas supporters poured funds into seemingly legitimate construction projects only for the proceeds to be funneled through pro-Hamas charities and ultimately into Hamas’s accounts in Gaza.

On December 28, 2024, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Turkish company Al Aman Cargo for financing arms transactions to Houthi rebels on behalf of Iran’s IRGC-QF.²⁸ The same designation also targeted several currency exchange houses located in Turkey and Yemen for their role in transferring millions of dollars to the Guard’s Quds Force.

Understanding these financial networks together makes it clear that Turkey is not just ignoring terrorist financing — it is actively facilitating it. Turkish banks, construction firms, and financial intermediaries are all part of a system that props up groups like Hamas and the Houthis.

Finally, it is important to note that Turkey is a long-time supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is not a U.S.-designated terrorist group. However, it probably should be. It is a vast global network of Islamist extremists whose primary goal is to regain worldwide dominance. In 2018, I testified before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform and noted that Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) is effectively the Turkish arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁹ The AKP-led government today provides centers of operations for Brotherhood operatives, and it has helped the network establish television and radio channels, foundations, schools, and businesses.³⁰

Neo-Ottoman Ambitions

The backing that Erdogan has provided Islamist terror groups is not simply a reflection of the Turkish strongman’s affinity for violent jihadists. Erdogan aspires to regional if not global domination, and he appears to believe that supporting these groups can help him achieve that.

The lightning collapse of the Assad regime and the equally rapid rise of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was Erdogan’s first major conquest in the Middle East. Turkish influence can be seen throughout the new regime. Turkish minders often attend HTS meetings with foreign diplomats.³¹ The Turkish lira is the currency of choice in Syria’s population centers.³² In many ways, Syria looks like a Turkish

²⁷ Sinan Ciddi, “Turkey is a Sanctuary for Terrorism Financing,” *Washington Examiner*, February 17, 2024. (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/2861072/turkey-sanctuary-for-terrorism-financing>)

²⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Targets Network Financing Houthi Attacks on International Shipping,” December 28, 2023. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2014>)

²⁹ Jonathan Schanzer, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Global Threat,” *Testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee*, July 11, 2018. (<https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Testimony-Schanzer-House-Oversight-Muslim-Brotherhood.pdf>)

³⁰ “Muslim Brotherhood ‘Rabaa’ channel launches in Turkey,” *Al Arabiya* (UAE), December 22, 2013. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/media/television-and-radio/2013/12/22/Muslim-Brotherhood-Rabaa-channel-launches-in-Turkey>)

³¹ Carlotta Gall, “Turkey Emerges as a Big Winner in the Wake of al-Assad’s Ouster,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2024. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/13/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-rebels-erdogan.html>)

³² Nicholas Frakes, “Turkish Lira Becomes Unofficial Currency in Syria as Economy Sinks,” *Al Arabiya* (UAE), June 15, 2020. (<https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/06/15/Turkish-lira-becomes-unofficial-currency-in-Syria-as-economy-sinks>)

“sanjak” or province — which harkens back to a time (the 14th to the 20th centuries) when Turkey was a global power.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, the hand of Turkey could be seen supporting multiple Islamist factions vying for power while ossified Middle Eastern regimes collapsed, one after the next. Egyptian, Libyan, and other Islamist groups vying for power were all reliant upon Ankara for political and other support.³³ Some still look to Ankara for backing in the hopes that they might replicate the success of HTS. Ankara would welcome the opportunity to further expand its regional influence through the ascendance of these groups.

Even Erdogan’s support for Hamas reflects his regional aspirations. Indeed, he has adopted rhetoric and policies that eclipse the tone of some of the most virulent populists in the Arab world. This is designed to position him as a leader of the Islamic world.³⁴ Erdogan’s recent calls for a pan-Islamic response to Israel’s military campaign in Gaza is a case in point.³⁵ Of course, the Islamic world did not heed his call. But this has not stopped the Turkish strongman from trying to gather the world’s Muslims under the Turkish flag.

But perhaps the most dangerous indicator of Turkey’s ambition is its “Blue Homeland” policy of dominating the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, even at the expense of other NATO members, such as Greece.³⁶ Tensions are rising in the Eastern Mediterranean today, with Turkish vessels challenging Greece and Cyprus at an alarming rate, even in their own exclusive economic zones. Ankara’s goal is nothing less than regional dominance.³⁷ Policymakers in Washington must keep a close eye on this dangerous dynamic. War in the Eastern Mediterranean becomes more likely with every act of Turkish aggression.

Amid all of this, Erdogan continues to push for Turkey to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.³⁸ “The world is more than five” is one of his common refrains.³⁹ This is, of course, a terrible idea. But it is also a warning to the West. The Turkish strongman has global ambitions. The Eastern Mediterranean is, quite literally, not the water’s edge.

³³ Jonathan Schanzer and Merve Tahiroglu, “Bordering on Terrorism: Turkey’s Syria Policy and the Rise of the Islamic State,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 19, 2014.

(<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2014/11/19/bordering-on-terrorism>)

³⁴ Steven Cook and Sinan Ciddi, “Erdogan Gets His ‘Leader of the Muslim World’ Moment,” *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2024. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/09/erdogan-turkey-syria-assad-muslim-world>)

³⁵ “Turkish President Calls on Islamic World to Unite Against Israel’s Genocide in Gaza,” *Anadolu Agency* (Turkey), November 4, 2024. (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-president-calls-on-islamic-world-to-unite-against-israels-genocide-in-gaza/3383600>)

³⁶ Ryan Gingeras, “Blue Homeland: The Heated Politics Behind Turkey’s New Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2020. (<https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy>)

³⁷ “Turkish Tensions Rise in Eastern Mediterranean: NAVTEX Challenge South of Kastellorizo,” *Greek City Times* (Australia), July 18, 2024. (<https://greekcitytimes.com/2024/07/18/turkish-tensions-rise-in-eastern-mediterranean-navtex-challenge-south-of-kastellorizo>)

³⁸ “Erdogan Says Turkey Eyes Permanent Seat on UN Security Council,” *Daily Sabah* (Turkey), September 27, 2024. (<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/erdogan-says-turkiye-eyes-permanent-seat-on-un-security-council>)

³⁹ Times of India, “Erdogan UN Speech Live, NATO Nation’s Fiery UNGA Address: ‘World Is Bigger Than Five,’” *YouTube*, September 25, 2024. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmkCDo3yhOs>)

Turkey's Role in NATO

Unfortunately, Turkey's membership in NATO has provided the Recep Tayyip Erdogan government with a platform to further undermine American and Western interests. Erdogan is Turkey's first leader to undermine the collective interests of NATO. The Turkish strongman has been able to simultaneously maximize his leverage and test the limits of the alliance.

This was made clear during NATO's most recent effort to include Sweden and Finland.⁴⁰ Initially, Erdogan welcomed the addition of the Scandinavian nations without reservation.⁴¹ However, Ankara quickly backtracked, holding Washington hostage by demanding the sale of F-16 fighter jets in exchange for its approval.⁴² Erdogan thus used Turkey's NATO vote as a bargaining chip, undermining the cohesion of the alliance and signaling a shift in Turkey's NATO commitments.

Turkey's adherence to NATO principles is by now seen by the Western alliance for what it is: a farce.⁴³ Since 2015, Erdogan has deepened Turkey's relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia — the country that necessitated the creation of NATO in the first place. In 2019, despite warnings from the Trump administration, Erdogan purchased the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, resulting in Ankara's removal from the F-35 program, and the imposition of U.S. sanctions.⁴⁴ To date, Turkey continues to possess the Russian system. The presence of Russian technology is a cyber threat to all NATO and U.S. systems in Turkey. This is a clear and present danger to NATO's interoperability and, in particular, the safety and security of the alliance's fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

It's also worth noting that Turkey has flirted with other alliances that undermine NATO. This includes engagement with the China-backed Shanghai Cooperation Council and BRICS.⁴⁵

Turkey's Relations With Russia and Ukraine

Unfortunately, Turkey's policy of duplicity is not limited to NATO. Ankara has adopted a duplicitous policy toward Ukraine, playing both sides of the confrontation between Moscow and the West.

⁴⁰ "What's Behind Turkey's Reversal on Sweden's NATO Bid?" *Georgetown University*, July 12, 2023. (<https://www.georgetown.edu/news/whats-behind-turkeys-reversal-on-swedens-nato-bid-a-foreign-policy-professor-answers>)

⁴¹ Paul Levin, "The Turkish Veto: Why Erdogan is Blocking Finland and Sweden's Path to NATO," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 8, 2023. (<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/the-turkish-veto-why-erdogan-is-blocking-finland-and-swedens-path-to-nato>)

⁴² Matthew Lee, "US approves F-16 fighter jet sale to Turkey, F-35s to Greece after Turkey OKs Sweden's entry to NATO," *Associated Press*, January 26, 2024. (<https://apnews.com/article/us-turkey-sweden-nato-ukraine-russia-02418dd7644bc8865fdafdf4c848dbd>)

⁴³ Sinan Ciddi, "It's Time to Reconsider Turkey's NATO Membership," *Foreign Policy*, December 6, 2023. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/06/turkey-nato-membership-alliance-russia-erdogan-sweden-syria>)

⁴⁴ Michael R. Pompeo, U.S. State Department, Press Statement, "The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231," December 14, 2020. (<https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231>)

⁴⁵ "Risking New Rift with Western Allies, Turkey Pursues Memberships of BRICS Bloc," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 4, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/04/risking-new-rift-with-western-allies-turkey-pursues-membership-of-brics-bloc>)

On the one hand, Ankara provided military aid to Ukraine and closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to Russian warships when the war began in 2022.⁴⁶ However, Turkey also maintained close trade and energy ties with Russia. It has also served as a conduit for Russian evasion of Western sanctions, including via the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant project, which is built, owned, and operated by Russia's Rosatom.⁴⁷ Worryingly, a significant percentage of Russia's illicit procurement of Western components used in military hardware has flowed through Turkey.⁴⁸

Over the years, Russia and Turkey have managed to compartmentalize their relations. They have engaged in major energy projects and cooperated on some geopolitical issues even as they competed on others. The fall of the Assad regime, however, has significantly altered the dynamic between Russia and Turkey. Whereas Moscow previously used its military presence in Syria and the threat of a refugee exodus from Idlib as a pressure point on Ankara, Russia's access to its key Syrian bases is now at the mercy of Syria's new rulers and their Turkish patrons.

While Erdogan plays the delicate game of diplomacy on the international stage, he must be careful. On the one hand, he has a seat at the big table. On the other hand, he is engaging with a brutal Russian strongman who may lose patience with his Turkish counterpart.

Domestic Political Developments

Since the 2016 coup attempt by U.S.-based cleric Fetullah Gulen and his followers, the Turkish leader has systematically dismantled Turkey's parliamentary system, replacing it with an increasingly centralized presidential system.⁴⁹ Erdogan is no longer accountable to any legal mechanisms, including the courts or the legislature. This grants him nearly unchecked power. He has wielded this power by deploying systematic suppression and steadily eroding the power of his political opposition.⁵⁰

In the meantime, the media in Turkey has been gutted. Once seen as somewhat robust and representative of all of Turkey's diverse population, the scope of coverage has narrowed considerably. Those who dare to publicly challenge Turkey's strongman publicly can pay a steep price. And that does not only hold for Turkish nationals. Several years ago, my FDD colleague Mark Dubowitz and I helped the Department of Justice with its prosecution of the sanctions-busting bank Halkbank, which helped the Turkish government move \$20 billion in cash and gold to Tehran. Mark and I soon found our names and faces on the front pages of the Turkish newspapers. We learned

⁴⁶ Raul (Pete) Pedrozo, "Closing the Turkish Straits in Times of War," *Lieber Institute West Point*, March 3, 2022. (<https://lieber.westpoint.edu/closing-turkish-straits-war>)

⁴⁷ "Turkey faces scrutiny as exports to Russia surge, fuelling concerns of sanctions evasion," *Euro News* (France), November 27, 2023. (<https://www.euronews.com/business/2023/11/27/turkey-faces-scrutiny-as-exports-to-russia-surge-fuelling-concerns-of-sanctions-evasion>)

⁴⁸ "Turkey Snubs NATO with Russian Arms Deal," *Arms Control Association*, October 2017. (<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-10/news-briefs/turkey-snubs-nato-russian-arms-deal>)

⁴⁹ Carlotta Gall, "The Coup Attempt That Set Turkey on a Path to Authoritarianism," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2024. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/22/world/europe/fethullah-gulen-erdogan-turkey.html>)

⁵⁰ Nate Schenkkan and Aykut Garipoglu, "Turkey's Elections Won't Be Free or Fair," *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2023. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/03/turkey-elections-erdogan-kilicdaroglu-vote-manipulation-suppression-media>)

that we were terrorists, coup plotters, and members of a notorious sex cult.⁵¹ Our Turkish colleague endured far worse.

Some apologists for this regime insist that Turkey is still a democracy. The facts do not support this. Recently, Erdogan floated the possibility of running for a fourth term in 2028.⁵² The Turkish constitution limits presidents to two terms.

Recommendations

The United States can no longer afford to ignore Turkey's malign foreign policies. Our government must undertake a robust policy shift to address these challenges. I offer the following 13 recommendations:

1. To counter Turkey's Neo-Ottoman aspirations, the United States should maintain its modest military presence in Syria to counter Turkish expansionist efforts and ensure regional stability.
2. The United States should actively block Turkish attempts to deploy private military contractors anywhere in the Middle East.
3. The United States should expose and punish Ankara's policy of allowing jihadist fighters to use Turkey as a transit and logistics hub.
4. The United States should confront Turkey over its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Sanctions are necessary to punish Ankara for allowing financial transactions via Turkish banks. A number of targets have already been identified by Israel's Shin Bet for laundering money to fund terror operations in the West Bank.
5. The United States should pressure Ankara to sever all ties with Hamas, including shutting down its offices, extraditing known operatives, and revoking travel documents issued to Hamas members.
6. The United States should continue to monitor Turkish involvement in weapons smuggling across the region, particularly along the Syrian borders with Jordan and Lebanon.
7. To better restrict Turkey's destructive role in NATO, the United States should leverage the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and appropriations mechanisms to block any efforts to reengage Turkey on the F-35 program or approve additional F-16 sales until Ankara fully dismantles and removes the Russian S-400 air defense system from its territory.

⁵¹ Jonathan Schanzer, "I'm a Wonk at a Think Tank. Turkish Media Say I'm an International Man of Mystery," *The Weekly Standard*, November 29, 2018. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/11/29/im-a-wonk-at-a-think-tank-turkish-media-say-im-an-international-man-of-mystery>)

⁵² "Fresh term for Turkey's Erdogan 'on our agenda', ruling party spokesman says," *Reuters*, January 13, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fresh-term-turkeys-erdogan-on-our-agenda-ruling-party-spokesman-says-2025-01-13>)

8. The United States should prevent Turkey from indigenously producing or co-producing aircraft engines to support its existing fleet, including blocking modernization kits, future parts, and maintenance purchases. This should include blocking the Turkish acquisition of any company involved in the production of these items.
9. The United States should exclude Turkey from regional maritime NATO exercises in the Mediterranean to limit its ability to exploit military drills for strategic gains.
10. The United States should ensure that Turkish aircraft do not train near disputed Greek and Cypriot islands. Additionally, Washington should explore options to stockpile U.S. military assets on Cyprus and expand the U.S. presence at British military facilities on the island as a means to send a clear signal in response to Turkish maritime aggression.
11. If Turkish harassment of Eastern Mediterranean states continues, the United States should support joint patrols by Israel, Greece, and other allied nations. The United States should consider participation, as appropriate.
12. The United States should compel Ankara to support the international sanctions regime against Russia, which it has thus far refused, citing economic concerns. The United States should also crack down on the activities of Russian oligarchs and Russian officials who have exploited Turkey's financial system to bypass international sanctions.
13. The United States must pressure Turkey to restore the rule of law and democratic governance. This includes demanding the release of opposition figures unjustly imprisoned and the reversal of other punitive measures taken against the political opposition.

On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for the opportunity to testify.