From Solid to Shaky: The Strained Alliance Between Turkey and NATO

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I. INTRODUCTION

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was formed in the aftermath of World War II, when it became clear that the Soviet Union was not interested in the notion of a united world rebuilding a sustainable peace after the war ended. Intended to present a united Western front against Soviet expansion and influence around the world, NATO was formed to be a military alliance that would serve as a deterrent to the Soviet Union and other enemies of freedom.

This paper addresses the relationship between Turkey and other members of the NATO alliance. Furthermore, this assesses how the history and structure of NATO, in addition to past NATO alliance actions in regional and global conflicts, have created the current environment in which Turkey’s interests and the interests of its NATO allies frequently diverge. Starting with the conflict in Cyprus in the 1960s, a roller coaster relationship developed between Turkey and its NATO allies in which Turkey’s interests often departed from those of the United States and other Western powers concerning the Middle East. Additionally, Turkey’s strained relationship with Israel frequently surfaces as a source of discord with NATO’s most powerful member country, the United States.

The current geopolitical landscape across the globe differs greatly from the Cold War atmosphere in which the battle between capitalism and communism led Turkey to seek support from the United States and refugee in NATO against Soviet aggression or threatened aggression. Today, there exists a radically different environment filled with threats ranging from the terrorist activities of ISIS and Hamas to Russia exerting more muscle, particularly in Syria and Iran. In this environment, Turkey’s role as a reliable ally for the United States and NATO is more crucial than ever before; however, with Turkish leadership striving to move from its secular roots towards a more Islamist foreign policy, reinforced by increasing signs of authoritarianism and
beginning to burn bridges with the West\textsuperscript{1}, Turkey’s loyalty to NATO has justifiably become more suspect. Turkey remains in a difficult bind; and while on one hand, it continues to call for tough action against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad\textsuperscript{2}, on the other hand, it has made friendly overtures to Russia\textsuperscript{3}. This leaves Turkish policy concerning Syria in disarray\textsuperscript{4}. All of this takes places against the backdrop of a failed coup attempt, coupled with recent constitutional changes that would allow the winner of the 2019 presidential election to assume full control of the government, thus ending the current parliamentary political system\textsuperscript{5}. This backdrop reinforces the perception that the new system of governance threatens the separation of powers, checks and balances, and civil liberties\textsuperscript{6}.

II. OVERVIEW OF NATO OBLIGATIONS

The North Atlantic Treaty is, at its core, primarily concerned with securing the collective defence of its members.\textsuperscript{7} Accordingly, as part of NATO membership, member states such as Turkey are required to maintain and develop their respective militaries against attack and pledge themselves to the principles of defence embodied within the Treaty’s articles\textsuperscript{8}—the three most significant of which are discussed here.

Member states’ most important obligation stems from Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states, “Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”\textsuperscript{9} If Article 5 is invoked, members may provide any form of support they deem necessary, including military assistance involving ground troops, depending on the level of material resources that members have available.\textsuperscript{10} Article 5 was invoked for the first and only time in NATO’s history following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and United Flight 93.\textsuperscript{11}

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\textsuperscript{3}Id.

\textsuperscript{4}Id.

\textsuperscript{5}See, Kingsley, supra note 1. This all takes place against a background in which the opposition has questioned the legitimacy of the referendum after the election board approved a last-minute change to increase the burden required to prove ballot-box stuffing despite instances of alleged voter fraud being captured on camera. Id.

\textsuperscript{6}Id.

\textsuperscript{7}See Collective Defence, NATO (Nov. 11, 2014, 10:15 AM), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm?.


\textsuperscript{9}Id. at art. 5.

\textsuperscript{10}Collective Defence, supra note 7.

As part of Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, members are required to “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”12 At a 2002 summit in Prague, NATO determined that, as part of this commitment, members should strive to spend 2% of their respective GDPs on defence.13 In 2013, only four countries met this benchmark—the United States, the United Kingdom, Estonia, and Greece—with Turkey spending 1.8%.14 Since the end of the Cold War, military spending by NATO countries has declined,15 with European countries in NATO averaging only 1.6% of their GDP on defence in 2013.16

Looking to Article 4 of the Treaty, NATO members have an obligation to consult with any member that feels its “territorial integrity, political independence or security” is threatened.17 Article 4 has only been invoked on four occasions, with three of these requests coming from Turkey—once in 2003 during the Iraq War, and twice in relation to the conflict in Syria.18 In each of these instances, NATO responded by instituting appropriate defensive measures;19 and, by acting under Article 4, NATO has been able to support Turkey without triggering the more serious repercussions of Article 5.20 This shows how NATO has been helpful to Turkey when it faced security threats from a variety of sources over the last half century. The affiliation between Turkey and its NATO partners has been mutually beneficial for most of its duration as evidenced by the history of these two entities’ relationship.

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12North Atlantic Treaty, supra note 8, at art. 3.
16See Erlanger, supra note 14.
17North Atlantic Treaty, supra note 2, at art. 4.
19See id.
III. HISTORY

A. NATO’s Founding

The North Atlantic Treaty was signed on April 4, 1949, in order to combat Soviet expansion and establish a stabilising presence within Europe.\(^{21}\) Soon after NATO’s founding, Turkey applied for membership and was eventually accepted in 1952.\(^{22}\)

One of the initial catalysts for Turkey’s admission into NATO occurred in July 1945 when the Soviet Union requested that Turkey return two Turkish border provinces previously held by Russia, and give the USSR joint control of the Bosphorus Straits.\(^{23}\) Per the Montreux Agreement of 1936, Turkey was granted the authority to police the Straits and ensure that only countries bordering the Black Sea could access them.\(^{24}\) Following World War II, however, the Soviets—against Turkish protest—wished to revise this agreement in order to aggrandize their role in the Straits’ function.\(^{25}\) By having greater access to the Straits, Soviet leadership could gain unfettered access to key trade routes linking the Black and Mediterranean Seas, as well as expand the USSR’s military influence in the region.\(^{26}\) Fearing that Soviet control of the Bosphorus would set a negative precedent at other key trading areas such as the Panama and Suez Canals, the U.S. began to unofficially support Turkey and dispatched the *USS Missouri* to Istanbul in order to send a clear message to the USSR.\(^{27}\)

In recognition of Turkey’s key role in the Cold War landscape, President Harry S. Truman appeared before a joint session of Congress in 1947 and requested that Turkey and Greece receive $400 million in aid as part of the “Truman Doctrine.”\(^{28}\) Providing such assistance under the Truman Doctrine was essential to U.S. foreign policy, as it allowed Turkey to increase its military capabilities and form a more effective bulwark against potential Soviet aggression in the Eastern Mediterranean.\(^{29}\) U.S. officials were concerned that the USSR could easily overrun a weak Western Europe; therefore, Turkey was needed to provide a cushion to absorb an initial Soviet assault, giving the U.S. sufficient time to mobilise its forces for a counterattack.\(^{30}\)

In order for this strategy to be fully implemented, U.S. military officials initially believed that it was necessary to establish formal “strategic coordination” between Turkey and the United States.\(^{31}\) With the founding of NATO in 1949, however, U.S. strategy shifted to buttressing

\(^{22}\) *Id.*
\(^{24}\) *See id.*
\(^{25}\) *See id.* at 246.
\(^{29}\) *Id.*
\(^{30}\) *Id.* at 814.
\(^{31}\) *See id.* at 819.
Western Europe, consequently reducing the amount of attention being given to Turkey.\textsuperscript{32} In fact, initial Turkish attempts to join NATO in April 1950 were rebuffed, with Italy being the only member to express support for Turkish membership.\textsuperscript{33} Turkey, along with Greece, was ultimately only offered an associational role with NATO, which caused Turkish officials to feel slighted that the alliance had not extended a bid for full membership.\textsuperscript{34} Accordingly, Turkey refused to lease any of its air bases to the United States or its allies unless Turkey was fully admitted to NATO.\textsuperscript{35} Realising that access to these bases was integral if the United States were to launch a successful counterattack, in May 1951, the U.S. officially proposed that Turkey, along with Greece, should be admitted as a full member.\textsuperscript{36} Despite initial resistance from Great Britain, Turkey became part of NATO on February 18, 1952.\textsuperscript{37}

B. Why Turkey Needed to Align With NATO

Turkey had many reasons to desire full membership as a NATO ally. As noted above, Turkey’s primary interest in joining was fuelled by concerns of protecting itself against the growing threat posed by the USSR with its ambitions for greater control of the Bosphorus Straights and the Mediterranean region in general.\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, Turkey witnessed first-hand how its neighbour, Greece, was severely threatened by Communist guerrillas in 1946.\textsuperscript{39} In order to combat the potentiality of a hostile takeover, Turkish leadership determined that it needed to find allied power that was sufficiently muscular to deter Soviet ambitions, given how inadequate Turkey’s own military was to handle such an invasion.\textsuperscript{40}

In addition to wanting to bolster itself against Soviet expansion, Turkey also desired to cement its ideological ties to the West.\textsuperscript{41} With an identity as a secular and liberal nation, Turkey wished to closely align with comparable Western political systems and distinguish itself from Communist ideology.\textsuperscript{42} Accordingly, in the eyes of Turkish leaders, NATO did not merely represent a defence coalition but also advanced desirable cultural and political norms.\textsuperscript{43} These aspirations to distinguish itself from eastern states and join the West can best explain Turkey’s actions throughout the Cold War, specifically its decision to send troops to aid in the Korean conflict.\textsuperscript{44}

When forces from North Korea crossed the 38th parallel and set off the Korean War, Turkey was quick to both condemn the attack as well as offer to send ground forces to defend
South Korea.45 The country of Turkey was united in its opposition to Communism, and there was significant public support for the decision to send troops to Korea and help check Soviet aggression.46 Accordingly, Turkey sent a full brigade—about 4,500 troops—to the Korean peninsula, which was more than any other country besides the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada.47 These troops fought throughout the war and some were even maintained as a peacekeeping force after the armistice was signed.48

IV. TURKEY’S RELATIONSHIP WITH NATO AND INVOLVEMENT WITH NATO MISSIONS

A. Cyprus Conflict

Turkey’s relationship with NATO countries, particularly the United States, developed strongly throughout the 1950s and early 1960s until June 5, 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson wrote a letter to Turkish officials warning them against interfering with the island of Cyprus.49 The Republic of Cyprus was formed on August 16, 1960, under an agreement signed by representatives of both the Greek and Turkish communities who resided on the island.50 This ethnically mixed government collapsed soon thereafter on December 21, 1963, as Turkish Cypriots claimed that their government officials were not being given adequate protection.51 Johnson warned that should Turkey invade the island and trigger a Soviet attack, Turkey’s actions could nullify the applicability of NATO defence commitments.52 Angered by this position, Turkey refused to increase its troop commitment to NATO and withdrew Turkish soldiers from South Korea.53

Conflicts between Turkey and Cyprus erupted once again in 1974 when Greek military leaders staged a coup against Greek Cypriot President Makarios and occupied the presidential palace.54 Soon after, Turkish troops invaded the northern portion island in order to support the Turkish Cypriot minority and subsequently gained control of roughly forty percent of Cypriot territory.55 Following these actions, Congress passed a series of resolutions to cut off arms sales to Turkey.56 These resolutions triggered on February 5, 1975, and caused deliveries of over $200 million worth of arms purchases and grants to be suspended.57 Turkey felt that such an embargo belied the important role that it played in defending NATO’s southern flank as well as the

45Id. at 94.
46See id. at 96.
47Id. at 95.
48Id. at 97.
51See id.
53Id. at 14.
55Id.
57Id.
Persian Gulf from a Soviet attack.\(^{58}\) In response, Turkey placed all U.S. military personnel in the country under Turkish control and limited its air base at Incirlik to “purely NATO” functions.\(^{59}\) These restrictions lasted until the embargo was completely lifted in September 1978.\(^{60}\)

**B. First Gulf War**

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, NATO forces were deployed to Turkey to monitor the crisis.\(^{61}\) Forty-two jets from Germany, Belgium, and Italy were stationed in eastern Turkey solely for defensive measures in case Iraq attempted to attack Turkey.\(^{62}\) These jets were placed in Turkey at the request of its leaders out of concern for Turkish national security.\(^{63}\) Furthermore, Turkish Air Forces assisted NATO pilots in enforcing a “no-fly zone” in northern Iraq meant to protect the Kurdish minority.\(^{64}\) Under Turkish supervision, pilots from the U.S., U.K., and France patrolled the region regularly to ensure that there were no unauthorised flights.\(^{65}\) British and U.S. pilots—taking off from Turkish territory—continually monitored this zone until 2003 when the Iraq Invasion began.\(^{66}\) Finally, in contrast to NATO’s traditional defensive purposes, Turkey allowed the U.S. to launch bombing raids out of its Incirlik air base throughout the Gulf War in order to eliminate Iraqi missile launchers.\(^{67}\) This reliance on Turkey by NATO allies revealed exactly how beneficial and crucial Turkey’s agreement would be in military action in the region. It also points to how tense the relationship can be within NATO when Turkey is not as compliant to the wishes of the U.S. and the rest of the alliance.

**C. Conflict in the Balkans**

Turkey was very outspoken against the violence occurring in Bosnia in the 1990s and urged military intervention—including the use of its own troops and aircraft—to stop Serbian aggression.\(^{68}\) Turkish jets were part of the NATO coalition that patrolled the skies over Bosnia in Operation Deny Flight, which was authorised by the UN to enforce a no-fly zone and shoot

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\(^{58}\) Khalilzad, supra note 49, at 15.  
\(^{59}\) Id.  
\(^{60}\) See Uslu, supra note 56, at 212.  
\(^{63}\) *NATO Operations & Missions*, supra note 61.  
\(^{65}\) Id.  
\(^{68}\) Haberman, supra note 62.  
down aircraft that infringed upon it. This operation resulted in the first live combat for NATO allies when U.S. fighter jets shot down four Serbian bombers on February 28, 1994.

During the summer of 1995, the situation in Bosnia worsened with Serb-launched mortars killing 37 Bosnian civilians in a market in Sarajevo. This attack prompted NATO to begin bombing Bosnian Serb targets and initiated what would become known as Operation Deliberate Force. Turkey participated in this operation and provided sixteen F-16 jets to assist in coalition strikes. Following the conclusion of this action, Turkey provided troops to support NATO peace-keeping operations Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilisation Force (SFOR) and assisted in reconstructions efforts in Sarajevo and Zenica.

Finally, in an effort to compel Serbian forces to end hostilities once and for all, on March 24, 1999, NATO initiated cruise missile strikes on Serbian targets in the Kosovo capital of Pristina as well as Belgrade. Turkish aircraft assisted in this operation for air defence but did not undertake any offensive role. The reason for limiting Turkey’s participation in direct strikes was due to NATO’s decision to not assign such roles to regional players. Turkey also provided 940 troops to NATO’s Kosovo Force (KFOR) meant to maintain peace.

D. War in Afghanistan

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, prompted the first invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. On October 4th, after NATO had confirmed that the attacks had been committed by Al-Qaeda, it agreed to support the U.S. with eight different measures. Included within these measures was Operation Active Endeavour, in which NATO’s standing navy was sent to the Eastern Mediterranean to patrol for potential terrorist activity. The initial military campaign in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, was not run through NATO, and NATO did not collectively become involved with direct efforts in Afghanistan until August

71Id. at 21.
72Id. at 28-29.
73Id. at 29.
74See id. at 53.
75See Nathalie Tocci, Turkey’s Neighbourhood Policy and EU Membership: Squaring the Circle of Turkish Foreign Policy, 67 INT’L J. 65, 69 (2011).
77KAREN DONFRIED, CONG. RESEARCH SERV., KOSOVO: INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS TO NATO AIR STRIKES 6 (1999).
78Id.
79ERIK JONES & SASKIA VAN GENUUGTEN, The EU’s Accession Negotiations with Turkey from a Foreign Policy Perspective, in THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY 60, 69 (2009).
82Id.
2003 when it took over the UN-approved peacekeeping force, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).  

Turkey has been involved in Afghanistan since 2001, but it did not participate in Operation Enduring Freedom. It refused to allow its troops to engage in direct counterterrorism activities, and Turkish forces were instead only involved with providing logistical support to Allied forces and training Afghan security personnel. Turkey has taken command of the ISAF force twice (June 2002–February 2003 and February 2005–August 2005); and during the latter phase, Turkey maintained its largest presence in Afghanistan with 1,450 Turkish personnel, commanding a total of 8,000 personnel from 30 different countries. As of June 2013, Turkey had approximately 1,110 troops in Afghanistan, placing it 8th among the 50 nations involved with ISAF.

The ISAF was under NATO leadership from August 2003 until December 2014, and on January 1, 2015, it was replaced by Operation Resolute Force, which is a non-combat mission designed to provide support to Afghan security forces. On January 6, 2015, the Turkish Parliament authorised Turkish troops to participate in this mission for the next two years. The motion passed by Turkish lawmakers also allowed foreign military personnel to be transported to Afghanistan through Turkish territory. A January 2017 report indicates that Turkey has agreed to extend its NATO mission in Afghanistan.

E. Iraq War

Shortly before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Turkey invoked Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, fearing for its security amid the potential armed conflict in Iraq. As an organisation, NATO took no part in this conflict; however, it did work to bolster the defence of Turkey’s south-eastern border through surveillance aircraft and missile defences. Specifically, both the Netherlands and United States provided defensive Patriot missile batteries. These measures lasted from February–May 2003.

83 James Sperling & Mark Webber, NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul, 85 INT’L AFF. (ROYAL INST. OF INT’L AFF. 1944) 491, 500-01 (2009).
85 Karen Kaya, Turkey’s Role in Afghanistan and Afghan Stabilization, MIL. REV., 2013, at 23, 23.
86 See id. at 24.
87 Id.
88 NATO Operations and Missions, supra note 61.
90 Id.
93 Id.
94 Id.
95 Id.
Controversially, Turkey did not allow U.S. troops to operate out of Turkish bases and ports for the invasion in Iraq.\textsuperscript{96} The vote to authorise such action failed in the Turkish Parliament by three votes.\textsuperscript{97} This action denied the use of Turkish territory to approximately 62,000 American troops and drew much criticism from the U.S. concerning Turkey’s status as an ally.\textsuperscript{98} As one U.S. commander commented, Turkey’s refusal to allow U.S. access made it impossible “to have a credible ground campaign” in Northern Iraq at the onset of the war.\textsuperscript{99} The Turkish Parliament did, however, allow the coalition to use Turkish airspace to attack Saddam Hussein’s regime.\textsuperscript{100} This debate among allies would foreshadow tensions to come in the years ahead.

**F. Syrian Conflict**

Following the Arab Spring, in March 2011, protests erupted in Damascus and the southern city of Deraa demanding the release of political prisoners.\textsuperscript{101} These events prompted a crackdown by Syrian government security forces that led to the deaths of multiple civilians.\textsuperscript{102} Then-Prime Minister Erdogan was quick to denounce the government’s handling of these protests and condemned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s “inhumane” actions.\textsuperscript{103} Prior to the uprisings, Turkey and Syria had been close allies;\textsuperscript{104} however, al-Assad’s actions prompted Turkey to shift its position and even allow members of the Free Syrian Army, the main government opposition group, to launch attacks from within the Turkish border.\textsuperscript{105} It appears that as a general matter, President Erdogan has continued to undermine the al-Assad regime and views al-Assad’s departure as a top priority for stabilisation in the region.\textsuperscript{106}

On June 22, 2012, Syrian military forces shot down a Turkish military aircraft over the Mediterranean that was carrying two crew members.\textsuperscript{107} Turkish officials claimed that the plane was shot down without warning from Syria, and that the aircraft was unarmed and clearly

\textsuperscript{100} Id.
\textsuperscript{102} Id.
identifiable as Turkish. Furthermore, while conceding that the aircraft had momentarily strayed into Syrian territory, Turkish leadership claimed that Syrian forces downed it over international rather than Syrian territorial waters. This incident prompted Turkey to consult with NATO allies under Article 4 in order to bolster its defence against potential Syrian aggression. Per the requirements of Article 4, representatives from NATO countries met to discuss the occurrence and ultimately condemned Syria’s actions “in the strongest terms.” NATO leaders did not promise any action in response as they did not believe that the situation between the two countries would escalate.

On October 3, 2012, a mortar shell launched from Syria landed in a Turkish border town and killed five civilians. Turkey once again invoked Article 4 under the North Atlantic Treaty out of concern for its territorial security.

Despite NATO’s willingness to cooperate in the preservation of Turkey’s territorial integrity, it’s often-vacillating foreign and domestic policy preferences have served to interrupt the country’s relationship with both the West and NATO. For example, in a particularly troubling development, despite Turkey’s alleged hostility toward Syria, Russia, Iran and Turkey [recently] agreed to establish “de-escalation zones” in Syria, signing on to a Russian plan under which President Bashar Assad's air force would halt flights over designated areas across the war-torn country.

It emerged Friday that the trilateral deal also seeks to ban U.S. aircraft from flying through the designated areas.

112 Id.
116 NATO Support to Turkey: Background and Timeline, NATO (Feb. 19, 2013, 8:54 AM), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natoq/topics_92555.htm?
Russia's representative at the Syria talks said the "de-escalation zones" would be closed to military aircraft from the U.S.-led coalition. Alexander Lavrentyev's comments Friday came a day after talks in Kazakhstan where Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to establish the zones.\(^\text{118}\)

Whether Turkey’s participation in this arrangement forecasts a change in Turkish policy toward Syria or not, it cannot be seen as a positive development for its relationship with NATO or the United States, which has invested huge amounts of blood and money in defeating ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. In an equally troubling development, Turkey recently bombed America’s Kurdish allies in Syria.\(^\text{119}\) This amounts to more than simply a dispute among friends. This constitutes a hostile action designed to harm U.S. interests in the Middle East, thus raising the question whether Turkey can be trusted as a NATO ally.

**G. Nuclear Sharing**

As part of NATO’s nuclear network, Turkey contains approximately 60-70 U.S. nuclear bombs at its Incirlik air base.\(^\text{120}\) Turkey has hosted U.S. tactical nuclear bombs since the Cold War to serve as a deterrent against Soviet aggression.\(^\text{121}\) The majority of these bombs are designed for U.S. aircraft; however, there is no American fighter wing based at Incirlik and Turkey has turned down requests to establish one.\(^\text{122}\) If the weapons ever needed to be deployed, U.S. aircraft would have to arrive from other bases to pick up the bombs.\(^\text{123}\) Furthermore, the Turkish Air Force, while nuclear-capable, is not certified to conduct NATO nuclear missions for the few bombs that are allocated for delivery by Turkish aircraft.\(^\text{124}\) Starting in 2015, Turkey’s F-16s are scheduled to be replaced over the next ten years by F-35 Joint Strike Fighters that are nuclear-capable.\(^\text{125}\) Presently, however, the nuclear bombs at Incirlik are limited in their military significance; thus, Turkey’s nuclear posture within NATO is unique and represents more of a symbolic measure in the post-Cold War era.\(^\text{126}\)

**V. TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS POTENTIALLY ADVERSE TO NATO**

**A. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation**

\(^{118}\) *Russia-brokered Syria no-fly zone deal bans U.S. Aircraft, too*, CBS/AP, (May 5, 2017)  


\(^{122}\) Norris & Kristensen, *supra* note 120, at 69-70.

\(^{123}\) Id. at 70.

\(^{124}\) See Bell & Loehrke, *supra* note 121.

\(^{125}\) Norris & Kristensen, *supra* note 120, at 70.

\(^{126}\) See id.
President Erdogan has created controversy with his various comments to Vladimir Putin about his interest in Turkey joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO was created as a counterweight to NATO and is seen by many as an “anti-American bulwark.”

Currently, there are six member states: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. On June 7, 2012, Turkey was accepted as a “dialogue partner,” giving it a greater symbolic connection with the SCO. Turkey is the first NATO member to reach such status with the SCO; and the U.S. State Department has commented that were Turkey to be accepted as a full member of SCO, it could make for an “interesting” situation. Turkish leaders have previously commented that seeking membership with the SCO is not mutually exclusive to membership with NATO.

B. Russia

Beyond the SCO and in spite of a tumultuous history between Russia and Turkey that includes fundamental disputes about President Bashar al-Assad’s future in Syria and aggression towards Ukraine, Russia and Turkey have developed momentum towards improved relations. Before Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, Russian-Turkish relations had drastically improved in many ways. Trade between the two countries reached $32 billion in 2013 (mostly Turkish imports of Russian energy), making Russia Turkey’s second-biggest trading partner behind Germany. In the trading of services, Turkey became Russia’s number one trading partner, according to Russian Central Bank statistics. Turkey also became the number one destination for Russian tourists, with an estimated four million tourists in 2013.

Politically, Russia and Turkey established the High Level Cooperation Council in 2010, which has led to regular consultation on regional issues between the countries’ officials. Despite Turkey’s strained relations with Russia dating back to the end of World War II, communications between Turkey and Vladimir Putin “appear to be far more regular and substantive than Putin’s exchanges with any other NATO member, especially after the alliance

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128 Harvey Morris, Turkey Hints at a Breakup with Europe, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 6, 2013, 9:00 AM), http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/turkey-hints-at-a-breakup-with-europe/
131 Ariel Cohen, Mr. Erdogan Goes to Shanghai, HERITAGE FOUND. (Feb. 18, 2013), http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2013/2/mr-erdogan-goes-to-shanghai.
134 Id.
135 See id. This increase in tourism is largely due to Russia and Turkey agreeing on visa-free travel for their citizens, allowing stays of one to three months. In the alternate, the EU and Turkey have attempted and planned out visa-free travel but have yet to finalise an agreement. Id.
136 Id.
shut down the NATO-Russia Council” in 2014. Vladimir Putin stated to Turkish media ahead of his visit in December 2014:

“Turkey-Russia relations remain stable, maintaining continuity and not depending on the current situation. Naturally our positions on some issues may not be exactly the same or even differ. This is natural for states carrying out an independent foreign policy.”

What does this mean for the relationship between NATO and Turkey? Increased tensions and more and more questions about the sustainability of the over half-century-long alliance. Although Turkish President Erdogan presses Putin on Crimea, Turkey has refused to join Western efforts to punish the Russians over their actions in Ukraine. This more moderate approach is radically different from the other governments close to these tensions—e.g. Central European NATO members—who have tried to push NATO and the United States to do more, including U.S. and/or NATO troop deployments in their territory. This is a classic example, however, of how Turkey’s role in NATO as a non-EU member changes the dynamic. Because the U.S. and EU have thus far dealt with Putin and Russia in a primarily economic manner instead of through military action, there is not significant desire or need from the West to push Turkey into confronting Moscow.

This is good news for Russia, but potentially problematic for a long-term, sustainable role for Turkey in NATO. Politically and symbolically on the world stage, Turkey’s reluctant role allows Russia to present NATO as non-unified in its resistance to Russian actions in Ukraine. Since the founding of NATO, Russia has tried to create tension and division within the alliance to further its own interests and influence. This current situation proves why this is so beneficial to Russia and its exertion of influence in the region—if NATO were to ever consider military action to restore Crimea to Ukraine or otherwise engage Russia, Turkey’s geographical position would pose the greatest threat to Russia’s naval base at Sevastopol, in addition to being key given its control of access to the Black Sea. In short, “[a] Turkey unwilling to participate in such a confrontation could sharply limit NATO’s options.” Recent history is replete with Turkish-Russian cooperation, particularly in Syria. This signals that Turkey may be unwilling to cooperate with NATO with respect to any conflict between Russia and NATO. This diminishes the value of Turkey as a NATO ally. Although the momentum favouring a Russia-Turkey alliance of some sort was halted when Turkish pilots downed a Russian warplane during the fall of 2015 following an alleged violation of Turkey’s airspace, recent cooperation between

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137Id.
139See Saunders, supra note 133.
140Id.
141Id.
142Id.
143Id.
144Id.
145Id.
Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria implies that the prospect of a Russia-Turkey alliance has now improved.

Taken together, there is some evidence that Turkey’s commitment to NATO is fracturing before our own eyes. Accordingly, if any of the above-referenced high-stakes scenarios involving Russia were to occur, it becomes increasingly possible that Turkey’s reluctance to fully engage with NATO may force the United States and NATO to avoid their preferred military response. Surely such a possibility ought to threaten Turkey’s place in the NATO alliance. Given Turkey’s current turn toward Islamic authoritarianism, it becomes increasingly likely that this nation can only be counted on in certain situations.

C. Iran

Similar to its relationship with Russia, Turkey has taken strides to shore up political and economic ties with Iran, notwithstanding its differing foreign policy positions. Although President Erdogan recently criticized Iran for attempting to “dominate” the Middle East, he has been willing to put aside his differences with Iran in order to capitalise on potential trade benefits. With the Iran nuclear deal being finalised and sanctions lifted, Turkey made no secret of its goal to increase bilateral trade between the two nations from $14 billion to $30 billion by the end of 2016.

This recent stint of cooperation is just another chapter in Turkey’s complicated relationship with Iran as both countries attempt to gain greater influence in the Middle East. Although Turkey wholly opposes Iran’s position on Syria and its support for President Bashar al-Assad, it also, as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council in 2010, voted against a U.S.-backed resolution that would have placed further sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program. It allowed the U.S. to install a sophisticated radar system in 2011 to protect against potential Iranian missile attacks, and then subsequently entered into a “gas-for-gold” scheme with Iran whereby Turkey exported nearly $13 billion of gold to Tehran in exchange for Iranian

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149 Joneidi, supra note 147.

150 Id.


153 Id. Turkey’s vote against the sanctions came after the U.S. rejected a deal that it, along with Brazil, had brokered with Iran over its nuclear program. The U.S. dismissed the deal because it allowed Iran to continue with its uranium enrichment. See Text: Powers Dismiss Iran Fuel Offer Before U.N. Vote, REUTERS (June 9, 2010, 10:02 AM), http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/06/09/us-nuclear-iran-response-text-idUSTRE6582W120100609.

natural gas and oil.\textsuperscript{155} This behaviour continued despite the fact that the Obama administration explicitly tightened sanctions on Iran’s trade of precious metals in 2012.\textsuperscript{156}

Although Turkey stated its opposition to Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon,\textsuperscript{157} it also had much to gain economically when the sanctions against Iran were lifted.\textsuperscript{158} Turkey’s conflicted relationship with Iran once again poses an interesting challenge to NATO and undermines Turkey’s reliability as an ally. Turkey’s actions toward Iran show that it is willing to put its own interests above those of the West, even while it is all too eager to ask for and accept NATO’s military prowess when Iran makes Turkey feel threatened. Rather than take a firm stance against Iran and its problematic nuclear program, Turkey has instead chosen to partner with Iran to fill its coffers. Accordingly, Turkey appears to be playing a dangerous game that will ultimately undermine NATO’s goal of a non-nuclear Iran. Such sentiments are richly reinforced by Turkey’s current rapprochement with Russia and Iran in Syria. This alliance persists—perhaps as one of convenience—even though both Iran and Turkey continue to vie for leadership in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

\textbf{D. The Syrian Conflict and Turkey’s Relationship with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party}

Before discussing Turkish foreign policy decisions relating to ISIS and how that impacts Turkey’s role in NATO, it is vitally important to understand Turkey’s relationship with the Kurdish people groups in Iraq and the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK).

The PKK was founded by Abdullah Öcalan in late 1978 with the stated goal of improving Kurdish rights.\textsuperscript{159} To further this aim, Öcalan and his followers called for an independent Kurdish state and subsequently launched an armed attack in one of Turkey’s south-eastern provinces in August 1984.\textsuperscript{160} This attack spurred a conflict that has run for the last three decades and claimed approximately 40,000 lives.\textsuperscript{161} In 2013, Öcalan called for a ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish government which paved the way for a tentative peace between the two entities.\textsuperscript{162} This agreement was recently strained, however, when Turkish warplanes bombed PKK camps in south-eastern Turkey in November 2014 after PKK affiliates engaged in “harassment fire” of Turkish military outposts.\textsuperscript{163} The PKK is currently listed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S., and the European Union.\textsuperscript{164}


\textsuperscript{156} Id.


\textsuperscript{158} Id.


\textsuperscript{160} Id.


\textsuperscript{164} Id.
accelerated, the United States and the West’s stated goal was to remove President al-Assad from power, insisting that the succeeding government guarantee ethnic and religious pluralism.\(^\text{165}\) As in many other conflicts in the region, the United States leaned heavily upon Turkey to usher in this solution. But Turkey’s ongoing conflict with Kurds in the region, who are part of the diverse coalition of anti-Assad forces, creates more sectarian strife during a time when the West has been trying to create a peaceful and pluralistic society.\(^\text{166}\) Turkey, instead, has supported the Muslim Brotherhood-controlled Syrian National Council, thwarting U.S. efforts to empower non-Islamist alternatives to President al-Assad.\(^\text{167}\) During this time period, Turkey has provided military aid and shelter to Sunni rebels while also doing very little about the jihadists in the region who were fighting al-Assad and targeting Turkey’s Kurdish enemies.\(^\text{168}\)

As a NATO ally, Turkey should have been aiding Western efforts to combat radical jihadists and supporting NATO allies in their efforts to oust President al-Assad. But strange bedfellows combatting the Syrian government have caused strained relationships between Turkey and its NATO allies, as Turkey has attempted to leverage sectarian violence to enhance its own power.\(^\text{169}\) This leaves the United States and other NATO allies blaming Turkey’s lax border control for the increasing number of radical jihadists who join ISIS by traveling through Turkey into Syria.\(^\text{170}\)

In the fall of 2014, Turkey finally authorised its military to conduct operations into Syria and Iraq in addition to allowing foreign troops combating ISIS to operate out of Turkish bases.\(^\text{171}\) Western allies such as the United States and other members of NATO welcomed this resolution as a sign that Turkey was finally willing to work in conjunction with the rest of the anti-ISIS coalition.\(^\text{172}\) Despite this optimism, Turkey’s changed policies could have less to do with the defeat of ISIS and more to do with its long-established foreign policy goals of toppling the al-Assad regime in Syria and defeating Kurdish separatists closely linked with the PKK.\(^\text{173}\) One sign of this can be found in the resolution passed by Turkish Parliament, which stated “the terrorist elements of the outlawed PKK still exist in northern Iraq.”\(^\text{174}\) This resolution gave no indication that Turkey itself would institute any anti-ISIS operations, but instead would cooperate with the campaign in hopes that the U.S. would agree to a no-fly zone in Syria.\(^\text{175}\) Turkey believes that a no-fly zone would undercut al-Assad’s air force, boosting rebels to


\(^{166}\) Id.

\(^{167}\) Id.

\(^{168}\) Id.

\(^{169}\) Id.


\(^{172}\) Id.

\(^{173}\) Id.

\(^{174}\) Id.

\(^{175}\) Id.
potentially defeat him, while also allowing a Turkish military presence that could defeat Kurdish fighters in northern Syria linked to the PKK.\footnote{176}

Turkish military action against the PKK would directly contradict the United States’ goal of defeating ISIS. The PKK, the Peshmerga, and the People’s Protection Unit (the PKK-linked Kurdish militia in Syria) have stood united against ISIS, providing “the West’s best hope for on-the-ground troops,” and leading multiple Western powers to discuss removing the PKK from terror lists.\footnote{177} Concerned that weapons sent to the Peshmerga could end up in the hands of the PKK, President Erdogan continues to view the PKK as potentially becoming empowered as the rest of the world looks for local fighters against ISIS.\footnote{178} Erdogan stated in early October 2014, “While the ISIS terror organization is causing turmoil in the Middle East, there has been ongoing PKK terror in my country for the last 32 years, and yet the world was never troubled by it. Why? Because this terror organization did not carry the name ‘Islam.’”\footnote{179} This sticky situation is likely to become more complex if the United States’ military moves to arm Syrian Kurds fighting ISIS in the face of Turkish opposition.\footnote{180} Tensions are likely to rise despite Defense Secretary James Mattis confidence that the dispute with Turkey over the decision to arm Syrian Kurds will not affect the relationship between NATO allies.\footnote{181} Time will tell.

E. ISIS

Because of Turkey’s varied interests relating to the Syrian government and certain segments of the anti-Assad coalition, Turkey has proved quite frustrating to members of the United States-led coalition against ISIS. As part of its overarching strategy, members of ISIS have been trying to amass territory for their caliphate within both Syria (against President al-Assad’s government) and Iraq (against the Iraqi government), targeting Christians and Kurds along the way.\footnote{182}

For Turkey, this means that radical jihadist extremists are fighting against its enemies. But as an ally of the United States and NATO, anti-ISIS forces need Turkey to shift its focus and actively work to thwart the ambitions of the Islamic State. Therefore, Turkey’s position in NATO is strained due to its reluctance to fully commit to fighting ISIS due to Turkey’s goals of bringing down al-Assad’s regime in Syria and the PKK. In late November 2014, Turkey’s main Kurdish party accused the government of being partially complicit with ISIS militants within

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{176}Id.
\item \footnote{177}Id.
\item \footnote{178}Id.
\item \footnote{179}Id.
\item \footnote{180}Natalie Johnson, U.S. Military to Move “Very Quickly” in Arming Syrian Kurds Despite Turkish Opposition DOD spokesman says strategy will ‘accelerate’ offensive to retake Raqqa from ISIS, (May 11, 2017) http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4959601,00.html
\end{itemize}}
Turkey’s borders. Despite the Turkish government refuting such claims, many activists within Turkey think otherwise:

Mustafa Bali, a Kobani-based activist, told the Associated Press that ISIS fighters have taken positions in the grain silos on the Turkish side of the border and to coordinate and launch attacks along the border near the crossing point. “It is now clear that Turkey is openly cooperating with Daesh,” said Bali, using the Arabic acronym [for] ISIS.

“As we have been pointing out for months, this once more proves that Islamic State is being supported (from within Turkey),” Turkey’s pro-Kurdish HDP party said in a statement.

There are good reasons for the scepticism surrounding Turkey’s relationship with ISIS. In September 2014, after three months in captivity, Turkish intelligence agents brought dozens of hostages abducted by ISIS back to Turkey. In the aftermath of this suspicious occurrence, Turkey seemed reluctant to condemn the actions of ISIS, which subsequently raised questions about whether Turkey had negotiated a deal with the terrorist organisation.

This is problematic for a variety of reasons now, as well as for some potentially dangerous, alliance-altering reasons in the future. Although Turkey’s border with the ISIS-run region of Syria is formally closed, smugglers use thousands of open roads within Turkish territory, charging only $20 dollars per person. This porous border problem made headlines when Hayat Boumeddiene, the partner of an ISIS-supporting terrorist linked to the Charlie Hebdo shootings, used this route to escape from Turkey into ISIS-controlled territory in Syria. Additionally, the three men arrested in New York City trying to join ISIS were planning on traveling through Turkey as well. This border has been porous and open since the conflict began in Syria, and Turkey wanted to allow the rebels easy access in and out of Turkey. Unfortunately, some of those rebels include ISIS affiliates.

More recently, as Turkey has tried to make efforts to help the United States and the coalition fighting ISIS, they have deported 1,100 foreigners suspected of trying to join ISIS. They have taken positive steps to close their border to ISIS. Western officials say that Turkish officials now usually act on information and detain suspects; however, many jihadists still make it through. Smugglers talk about ISIS spies and killers inside Turkey, creating an environment

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184 Id.
185 Id.
186 Id.
187 Id.
188 Id.
189 Id.
191 Id.
192 Id.
193 Dominique Soguel & Aya Batrawy, Turkey Tightens Jihadist Highway Near Syria Border, Pressuring ISIS, HAARETZ (July 6, 2016) http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/1.729255
192 Trofimov, supra note 188.
where the Turks do not wish to make problems for ISIS because they fear the repercussions the Islamic State might bring.\textsuperscript{193} Repercussions include the fact that ISIS has engaged in bombing attacks inside Turkey that may represent open warfare.\textsuperscript{194} This problem is exacerbated by virtue of the fact that Turkish officials estimate that at least 1,000 Turks have joined ISIS.\textsuperscript{195} Nonetheless, there is evidence that Turkey has made some progress in fighting ISIS but Turkey’s record over the past 4 years is bereft of consistency. Instead, the record is one of ambivalence.

F. Israel

The diplomatic relationship between the West’s two largest allies in the Middle East, Turkey and Israel, has been stalled since 2010 when Israeli mistakes resulted in a deadly raid on an aid ship sailing from Turkey to Gaza.\textsuperscript{196} Nine activists—eight Turks and one American of Turkish descent—were killed in that 2010 raid on the aid ship trying to run the naval blockade on supplies to Gaza.\textsuperscript{197} This action exacerbated already icy relations between the two nations stemming from the 2008 Gaza War.\textsuperscript{198} Recent statements by President Erdogan urging Muslims to flood Jerusalem confirm that Turkey cannot and should not be trusted.\textsuperscript{199} “Meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah in Istanbul” in early May 2017, “Erdogan ‘confirmed the necessity of unifying efforts to protect Jerusalem against attempts of Judaization,’” Palestinian news agency Maan reported.\textsuperscript{200} Among other things, he claimed that “Turkey had a ‘historical responsibility’ to Jerusalem, as the Ottoman Empire occupied the city in the 16th century.”\textsuperscript{201} In other words Erdogan, apparently, sees himself as the new sultan with Jerusalem, if not Israel itself, as part of his caliphate. This ominous possibility is compounded because Turkey refuses to quit supporting Hamas completely. One report suggests Turkey’s hostility to Israel is manifest in the nation’s apparent recruitment of Palestinian students for terrorist activities, military training and economic aid to Hamas in Gaza.\textsuperscript{202}

In 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry began working with Turkey to normalise relations with Israel.\textsuperscript{203} This followed upon the work of President Obama brokering an agreement earlier in 2013 to restore ties.\textsuperscript{204} Contrary to the spirit of this agreement, however, then-Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan followed up the settlement by boasting of Turkish power and influence in the

\textsuperscript{193} Id.
\textsuperscript{194} Don Melvin, Turkey and ISIS: Istanbul Attack Signals Descent Into ‘Open War’, NBCNEWS (Jan. 3, 2017) (ISIS has claimed responsibility for the shooting, identifying the attacker who killed 39 people as ‘a heroic soldier of the caliphate’)
\textsuperscript{196} See Arango, supra note 168.
\textsuperscript{198} See Arango, supra note 170.
\textsuperscript{200} Id.
\textsuperscript{201} Id.
\textsuperscript{202} Yoav Zitun, ynetnews.com, (May 9, 2017), http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4959601,00.html.
\textsuperscript{203} Gordon & Kershner, supra note 197.
\textsuperscript{204} Id.
region. Furthermore, Turkish officials behind the scenes of these negotiations insisted on preconditions for restoring full diplomatic ties with Israel, including the “lifting” of the Israeli embargo on Gaza for civilian goods and the settling of compensation for the 2010 incident.

More recent events have only aggrandised the tensions between Turkey and Israel, placing the United States and other NATO powers in a difficult position at a time when conflicts require what few Middle East allies they have to be reliable and supportive. In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu compared the jihadist gunmen in Paris with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, saying both were guilty of “crimes against humanity.” Turkish President Erdogan also criticised Netanyahu for marching alongside other world leaders in Paris the weekend after the attacks, accusing Israel of “waging state terror” in Gaza. Erdogan stated, “I, of course, find it hard to understand how he dared to go there. First, give an account of the children, the women that you have massacred.”

These escalating tensions are not surprising given that over the past few years Erdogan has “furthest distanced himself from Turkey’s secular past, seeking to burnish his Islamist credentials and put Turkey forward as an exemplar for the Muslim world, . . . increasingly cast[ing] Turkey as a defender of the Palestinians and a supporter of Hamas.” During a time in which Hamas has been delegitimised and distanced from many supporters in the Middle East, Turkey continues to defend Hamas publicly and provide financial assistance privately. Furthermore, Saleh al-Arouri, the founder of the Qassam Brigades—Hamas’s armed wing in the West Bank—lives in Turkey and is reported to have been involved in financing and planning extreme militant activity in the region. Evidently, such support for Hamas continues, either tacitly or explicitly, despite the existence of a Turkey-Israel reconciliation agreement designed to make it more difficult for Hamas to operate in Turkish territory.

VI. THE FUTURE FOR TURKEY & NATO

When NATO was formed, the United States and the Western powers in Europe had many reasons to want Turkey as a full-fledged NATO member. With the Soviet Union showing aggression anywhere and in any way that it could, Turkey served as a rare ally whose geopolitical positioning proved helpful for any number of offensive and defensive operations against communist activity. Over the past six decades, Turkey has received numerous benefits of its NATO membership, including protection of its sovereign integrity against Soviet threats and conflicts arising in the Middle East. During the first Gulf War, Turkey’s role in NATO proved how helpful it could be, while also revealing how its non-compliance could severely complicate the alliance in the future.

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205 Id.
206 Id.
207 See Arango, supra note 170.
208 Id.
209 Id.
210 Id.
212 Id.
213 Zitun, supra note 200.
In the post-9/11 world in which we now live, where Russia once again feels emboldened to defy the West and radical jihadists complicate the centuries-long sectarian rivalries in the Middle East, Turkey’s interests continue to slowly diverge away from those of the United States and the other NATO powers—whether it relates to Israeli-Palestinian affairs, the Syrian conflict, or stopping ISIS.

At this stage, however, both Turkey and NATO still mutually benefit from the alliance, even though it is strained and tested. Barring a NATO-led military conflict with Russia or the need for NATO ground troops to battle ISIS, Turkey and NATO will likely stay allied because Turkey still gains much-needed security, and the U.S. and NATO can still use Turkey’s military bases and airspace in case of an emergency. But what happens if the U.S.-led coalition wants to send ground troops to Syria to battle ISIS, or tensions with Russia escalate? What would happen if NATO agreed to send in troops and Turkey refused to acquiesce to the plan? One answer emerges in Turkey’s recent bombing attack on the United States’ courageous allies, the Syrian Kurds. If Turkey is willing to bomb Syrian Kurds as part of President Erdogan’s mounting paranoia, then Turkey should be properly seen as an undependable ally. In certain situations, it ought to be more properly seen as an enemy.

Turkey’s untrustworthiness could, and perhaps should, spell the end of Turkey’s place in NATO. While not probable, in an increasingly unstable global environment, there are numerous events that could occur that would result in a complete break. More likely, however, is a continued ebb and flow of tensions in the alliance. Even though there are many current foreign policy issues that cause strain in the alliance, Turkey and the rest of NATO could still benefit greatly from a positive relationship. Although the global geopolitical environment differs, one thing has not changed: while Turkey and the West do not always agree, they still have much to lose if they abandon their alliance altogether. The threats in the world, though different, are simply still too large to ignore. The question remains whether Turkey’s current government—which is a serial human rights violator that has embarked on a purge of state institutions and ordered the arrest of tens of thousands of suspects linked to exiled cleric Fetullah Gulan\(^{214}\)—can be trusted to look at global events and threats rationally. Recent Turkish history indicates that the prospect of rationality is not promising.

\(^{214}\) Moore, supra at note 199.