Turkey's Neo-Ottoman Resurgence

February 10, 2025
Featuring Henri J. Barkey, Sinan Ciddi, Dimitris Kairidis, and Jon Schanzer
Moderated by Lena Argiri
Introductory remarks by Endy Zemenides

ZEMENIDES: Welcome, and thank you for joining us for today's event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

On behalf of the Delphi Economic Forum, Kathimerini, and the Hellenic American Leadership Council – first of all, I'd love to thank FDD for continuing this partnership with the Delphi in DC Forum.

I am Endy Zemenides. It's Monday, February 10th, and today's panel will explore Turkey's Neo-Ottoman ambitions.

For some of us, they're not so “neo” or not so new and there are plenty people here, and especially among our experts, who may remember Erdogan's victory speech in 2011, when he said, "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul. Beirut won as much as Izmir. Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem."

Erdogan has long had his eye on hegemony in the region, and from that speech, we've gotten things like the Blue Homeland, farcical and fictional maritime agreements with Libya, and now, the leadership of a – a new kind of axis of resistance with Ankara leading the HTS [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham], Hamas, Hezbollah and others.

So, we have a great group of experts to discuss this and what it means for the region, and U.S. foreign policy. Please join me in welcoming our experts.

First, Henri Barkey, the Bernard L. and Bertha Cohen Chair in International Relations at Lehigh University and an adjunct senior fellow for Middle East studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Henri currently sits on the Board of Trustees for American University in Iraq and on the Board of Advisors for FDD's Turkey Program. Previously, Henri served as director of the Middle East Center at the Woodrow Wilson Center and a non-resident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He has written exclusively – extensively on Turkey, the Kurds and other Middle East issues.

Sinan Ciddi is a nonresident senior fellow at FDD and an expert on Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy. He is an associate professor of national security studies at Marine Corps University. Prior to joining MCU, Sinan was executive director of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service – sorry – professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service between 2008 and 2011. He established the Turkish Studies Program at the University of Florida's Center for European Studies.

Jonathan Schanzer is a very happy Philadelphia Eagles fan.

(LAUGHTER)

ZEMENIDES: Yeah. Jon – he's executive director at FDD, where he oversees the work of the organization's experts and scholars. Jonathan previously worked as a terrorism finance analyst at the U.S. Department of Treasury, where he played an integral role in the designation of numerous terrorist financiers. He has held previous think tank research positions at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Middle East Forum. Jonathan's latest book, "Gaza Conflict 2021", which I wish some people had read long before October 7, challenges and corrects some of the wildly inaccurate news reported during the conflict.

Minister Dimitris Kairidis, who I will distinguish him from the other three panelists because you have to start coming on the Greek current as much as they do to compete. You have to do dozens of episodes to catch up – is a member of the Greece-Cyprus-Israel-U.S. Interparliamentary Committee, which works to increase collaboration in areas of common interest. He previously served as Greece's Minister of Migration and Asylum. Minister Kairidis also served as vice chairman of the Parliamentary Committee of European Affairs and is head of the Greek Parliamentary Delegation to the Conference on the Future of Europe, where he was co-chair on the – of the Working Group on Migration. He is a professor of international politics at Politics at Panteion University of Athens and has previous – published extensively on Greek-Turkish relations.

Finally, moderating our conversation again – we're lucky – another Greek current favorite, Lena Argiri, the DC correspondent for Greek Public Broadcasting ERT and for Kathimerini. She focuses on Greek-related issues for American audiences, and she does a lot on the subject today.

Before we jump in today's conversation, a few words about the FDD. For more than 20 years, the FDD has operated as an independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, they do not accept foreign government funding, so no FARA [Foreign Agents Registration Act] issues today. For more on FDD's work, please visit FDD.org, follow FDD on X and Instagram and subscribe to FDD's YouTube channel. They're everywhere, and they have led the conversation on the Eastern Mediterranean for a number years, so thank you again for continuing this.

Lena?

ARGIRI: Thank you, Endy. Thank you all for being here, and of course, thank you for watching online. A huge thanks to the FDD for hosting us for another year, and my deepest gratitude to our panelists for taking the time today.

As Endy said, the changes taking place in the Middle East over the past year and a half are truly significant, and it seems like a new order is taking shape before our very eyes. So, to discuss these developments, and particularly how Turkey's trying to take advantage of these changes, I'm pleased to be joined by, as Jonathan – as Endy said, Jonathan – by Jonathan, Mr. Kairidis, Henri and Sinan.

And Jonathan, I would like to start with you. Turkey's today the main sponsor, or the main backer, of HTS in Syria. It has doubled down on its support for Hamas and in every conflict that Israel has, either with Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, or any other actor, it is consistently siding against Israel. So, my question is, is the Erdogan regime building a new “Axis of Resistance”? What do you think?

SCHANZER: Well, first of all, wonderful to have everybody here today.

I think that Erdogan doesn't quite know whether he's building an axis of resistance along the lines of what we've seen from Iran, right, where Iran built six or seven different fronts where it was able to attack Israel simultaneously; called it a "ring of fire", right? That's what the Iranians called it.

I don't think that Erdogan has that yet. But if you compare what the Iranians began to build, let's say somewhere around 1987, 1988, into the early 1990s, that was a formative period for the Iranians. They began to understand that they could draw proxies closer to Israel, and over a long period of time, begin to attack and degrade Israel. And we saw an attempt to activate that over the last year and a half.

Erdogan has right now two fronts covered, right? He's got Hamas, although Hamas is significantly degraded. If Hamas is rebuilt in any shape or form, Turkey will have a significant role to play in the leadership and guidance of Hamas, but HTS undeniably is a proxy of the Turkish regime.

What we're – what we need to watch very carefully is whether Turkey tries to expand that further. We know that Turkey has assets in – for example, in the Horn of Africa. I don't know if they would pose direct threats to Israel, but we have to be aware now of the new paradigm embodied by the Houthis, that we now see terrorist organizations that are equipped with longer distance capabilities, ballistic missiles that can fire at Israel from far away. Is this part of the new strategy on the part of Iran or on Turkey? We don't know.

But what actually really bothers me the most right now when I start to take a look at the map post-10/7, you know, we see the Iranian regime and all of its capabilities, all of its proxies have been degraded, and we see the Turks building up some of these kind of new capabilities with new actors.

There is a sense, I think a – an erroneous sense among analysts here in Washington that there is a competition that is taking place between the Islamic Republic and the government of Turkey, that they are fundamentally at odds with one another.

But if one goes back and looks at the last decade or so, what we actually see is a confluence of interests between the Turks and the Iranians in ways that I don't think are appreciated here. I mean, what – the case in point for us here at FDD – we did a lot of work on what was known as the "gas for gold scheme", where the Turks were literally helping Iran evade American sanctions and to move $20 billion in illicit cash and gold from Turkey to Iran.

These are the things that worry me right now because they don't necessarily need to be operating against one another. They can be working together in their common goal, and Erdogan has made it very clear that he envisions a world in which the entire Middle East rises up against Israel to destroy it.

ARGIRI: And we talk about, kind of "why", Sinan. What Jonathan just described represents, I would say, a dramatic – a significant change in Turkish orientation. Can you please explain this change, this evolution from a Turkey that – it was, I would say, a relatively good NATO ally and a friend of Israel, to what we see today?

CIDDI: Well, we could say there's a long track record of this. It's not new, it's been developing for over a decade now. And many people ask sort of, as you rightly sort of pointed out, why this sort of escalatory move against Israel?

One of the big reasons that Erdogan has essentially consistently said throughout this, especially since 2016 when Turkey really took a different trajectory internally, was the suggestion that the Western Hemisphere and the Western-led liberal international order was in a steep decline. And as a result of that, Turkey no longer felt, under Erdogan's watch, to essentially uphold the values, the norms, the principles of the Western-led liberal order.

And from that perspective, Turkey has degraded its relationship with NATO, it's degraded its relationship with the European Union, as well as the United States on numerous levels. But the Israeli front, I think, is just a personal front that Erdogan has really decided to essentially latch onto, and that was personal for him. And that's basically, I would argue, rooted in his deeply antisemitic, anti-Israeli view, which he made very apparent even earlier than 2016 – we can trace that all the way back publicly, you know, when he was leader of Turkey, going back as early as 2008, if I'm not mistaken on the date of this, when he literally started ripping apart the relationship between Turkey and Israel.

But I think what really gave him the opportunity to capitalize upon that sort of sentiment was October 7th terrorist attacks. And he's really sort of come out forcefully thumping this, because as Jon said, I think that's his way into essentially wanting to dominate regionally in a way to see if he can establish a new Middle East in this post – sort of, Hamas, post-Hezbollah space where Turkey essentially leads this, and has a big, outsized voice, to the detriment of Israel. And as far as he's concerned, everything on the drawing table is on the table, right?

I think one of the things that we've woken up to in the last couple of months, if not longer, is now that everybody – essentially, the – you know, the euphemism is Turkey now borders Israel, right, given its control of HTS, some of the other sort of jihadi-aligned militias inside of there.

And everybody's wondering, to what extent will Erdogan sort of make good on this aspirations to degrade Israel's influence and standing in the region? Will the United States stand up to it? Will the European Union stand up to it? And nobody seems to have an answer to this, but Erdogan is pressing full steam ahead.

ARGIRI: Mr. Kairidis, in the midst of all this chaos that we're discussing now, Turkey seems to be ending the period of the escalation with Greece. The Blue Homeland Doctrine is back on the table. The violations of the Greek airspace have resumed. And, you know, just recently, just a few days ago, it declared that it has rights around the island of Crete.

So, my question is, at what point does this behavior become unsustainable for Greece?

KAIRIDIS: I think we are at a very critical moment, and we are in peril of losing the little bit of progress that we have achieved the last few years. I think the best way to understand what is happening is to have a holistic view of Erdogan's foreign policy and foreign behavior the last 22-something years that he's in power.

And to make a long story short, I would say that you can divide this – oops – you can divide this in three periods.

The first period of Erdogan, when he came to power back in 2002 until 2012, 2013, the Gezi Park demonstrations. One can say that there was a European phase and there was a promise of liberal, pro-European reforms. We know in hindsight that this was more tactical than strategic on his part and that already then, he had a transactional view of Europe. He was not a committed Europeanist. He used the European vocation to get rid of [the] army's political role and influence.

As soon as he achieved that, we went into his second phase that was characterized by increased antagonism with its neighbors. He came in conflict not only with Greece, with Blue Homeland Doctrine and the Libyan – Turkey's Libyan memo he signed for the supposed delineation of the economic – Exclusive Economic Zone – but – with Israel obviously, with Egypt, with the United Arab Emirates, even with Saudi Arabia.

Then, after 2021, '22, he moved into a third phase, which is not a return back to the initial phase of liberal reforms and “no problems with neighbors”, et cetera, but to – a recalibration from the increased antagonism and militarism that characterized the second phase as a result of the pressure that was exerted on him.

And I want to stress the need for that pressure. The moment that the carrot of European membership was removed, the only way to influence the behavior was the stick of pressure. And pressure there was first and foremost from the economy, and we have seen a return to more orthodox economic policies, especially on the monetary side internally. And pressure there was from the outside world. Not only Greece and Egypt and Israel, but first and foremost the United States.

It was something that started under the final years of Donald Trump when he was president with Secretary Pompeo and his expulsion, Turkey's expulsion from the F-35 program. And continued and abated during the Biden presidency.

Now, today, Erdogan feels embolden. Not only because there are certain objective facts on the ground, that is, the fact that Turkey is a big economy member of the G20, it has a certain demographic vitality, it has presence – military presence in various countries around. But also, because he feels empowered and emboldened by the change in Syria and the change, let us be frank, in the White House.

I think it will be a mistake to withdraw from the pressure that there was, which yielded some tangible results in his behavior, both on the economic side and on the foreign policy side, albeit decreasingly so. So, I am worried about events in Syria. And about the US role in the area, which I wanted to continue being clear and strategically focused. Turkey – and I finish, Turkey is obviously an important country, there is no doubt about that. There are many important countries, obviously Iran is an important country. Nobody can doubt that, but the problem is not the importance. The question is not the importance. The question is the behavior, and in order to have the right behavior allied with Western interests.

Now that we live in a world of interest, and we might be thankful to Trump for bringing some clarity, to put it mildly, to U.S. foreign policy, away from that confusion between principles and values and interests that all the previous administrations had, now that we live in a world of pure and simple interests, the need is to have Turkish behavior allied with this interest and the best way is to continue that pressure and not to harm and hurt the balance of power in the area in any sort of way that will put crazy ideas, daring ideas in his mind, in the mind of the regime in Ankara.

ARGIRI: We'll talk in a while about the role of the United States in the region, what this role should look like, but Henri, we see Turkey raising tensions both within NATO and also in areas that affect the NATO alliance, like Libya, like Syria, and like Israel. And at the same time, we see Turkey maintaining, if not improving relations with Iran and Russia.

So, my question is, has Turkey become a liability within NATO? What do you think?

BARKEY: Well, I mean, look: we are in the process of a major transition. I mean, we still don't know what's going to happen in Washington in terms of what the new president has in mind, not only with respect to general alliances in general, but also NATO in particular. But what I would say to – given everything else that was said, I think the way to look at Erdogan is slightly different – not differently, I would just put another context to it. And that is when you think about countries and you talk about the foreign policy of countries, you kind of have an idea that the national interest, you know, we – is – you know, we professors have spent time trying to define what national interest is. We still don't know what it is.

But the point here is that there are certain things that are immutable, I mean, that are obviously national interest. But in the case of Erdogan and populist leaders like him, especially one that has been in power as long as he has and intends to stay in power for much longer. The issue is, is it Turkey's foreign policy that we're talking about? Or are we talking about Erdogan's vision for himself and his vision of Turkey, which may be different than what – let's say, other people in Turkey think?

I mean, in a way, what I'm saying is – what I'm trying to say is that foreign policy for Erdogan is both a way for him to achieve his own aims and ambitions and be essentially one of the great leaders of the world. He definitely sees himself as one. He sees Turkey as obviously as one of the great – great powers. I mean, almost from the beginning, when he came to power, if you remember, he talked about the United Nations [Security Council] being bigger than five, and he used to take his hand up there, and he always had a vision that, Turkey, representing the Islamic world, should be a permanent member of the Security Council that Turkey – had, and he's – and he did succeed.

Let's face it. I mean, he made he allowed Turkey to economically expand. He improved relations with all series of countries. He made Turkey an important actor in world politics. The thing is here that foreign policy is a vehicle for his own personal advancement. And I would say – and this is, I think, very critical, his own protection.

What do I mean by that? I mean, if you look at Turkey today, yes, he – you look at all the policies that Erdogan advocates but at the end of the day, foreign policy is the thing that will save him.

Look, he is not in a very enviable situation. His economy is in – is suffering. All right, he has serious problems. He has lost the major cities. I mean, he's – look at what he's doing. Every day, more people are going to jail on completely nonsensical reasons.: “You wrote a tweet seven years ago. Boom, you get arrested.” The mayor of Istanbul, who clearly is the most important potential contender against him, is being charged right, left, and center. And they're going to find him guilty of something and make him ineligible to run.

Why is he doing this, if he was that confident at home, if he was that popular at home? I think he realizes that if there were genuine elections tomorrow, he would lose. Why not? I mean, look, he's been in power that long. I mean, people get tired of their leaders. And so that's one big issue he's confronting. And for him, foreign policy then becomes an instrument to distract attention, to make speeches every day, to even maybe do something, whether it's in Syria or elsewhere, that will mobilize nationalist opinion.

And look, and the other thing is, he does have a serious Kurdish problem. He's trying to figure out a way to go around it because he needs the Kurds to get another term in office. But the Kurdish issue is also very tied to what's happening in Syria, in that, yes, he does want to get rid of the YPG [People's Defense Units] in Syria, but the Kurds in Turkey hold the key to this because Turkish Kurds are very attached to Rojava. So, he had a peace process at one point that failed, and now he's talking about another one. He doesn't – I mean, in my view, I don't think he's sincere and wants to take it through, but this is all about protecting himself.

So, I think we should look at foreign policy. And I did not answer your question in a direct way, whether or not he's a liability in NATO or not really depends on what it is NATO, or any particular issue, brings to his survivability. And that's the most important issue. That's what he goes to bed thinking about, and that's what he gets up thinking about.

ARGIRI: Thank you, Henri. And Jonathan, from Erdogan's efforts to protect himself, let's talk a little about – a bit about his relationship with Iran. And you mentioned that sometimes, this relationship is complicated. So, the U.S. is expected to return to a maximum pressure policy towards Iran. The President already signed this executive order. How this development will affect Erdogan's role in the region?

SCHANZER: I do think that to some extent, even though I don't believe that Turkey and Iran are in competition, I do think that Iran's loss could be Turkey's gain. I think we need to watch that dynamic very closely. Right? We're watching maximum pressure will take hold. It means that the cash reserves of the regime will dwindle. That means that its ability to pay its proxies will dwindle. That means that, for example, Turkey will have probably greater sway over the Iranians, over Hamas, than Iran does.

Over time, they'll be able to find – I mean, we saw this, by the way, during the last round of significant sanctions. This was when the Qataris and the Turks began to fill the void left by Iran because of the sanctions pressure that was put on the regime by the United States. I think there will be some interesting questions about whether the Europeans join this pressure campaign. Last time around, we really saw a divergence between the Europeans and the United States as it related to a wide array of foreign policies. I'd like to see them more aligned, but we could begin to see this sort of bifurcation, the Europeans deciding to put pressure on one actor, the U.S. putting pressure on another.

But in short, I think we're heading into a moment of chaos, and I think that is a place where Erdogan is going to thrive. Erdogan likes the lack of assertiveness. Perhaps if the U.S. decides we're going to leave Iraq, we're going to leave Syria, this is a benefit for him at the end of the day.

And I think that's where I think we need to keep our eyes right now, is how much we decide to pull back from the region. It's one thing to say we're going to put pressure on the Iranians, and to put more sanctions pressure on them, but if we leave the region, I think the Turks will be able to fill some of that void. The Iranians will be able to fill some of it as well. So, a lot to keep our eyes on right now.

ARGIRI: Sinan, would like to turn to the domestic front with you. And how do Turkey's internal political dynamics shape foreign policy choices, like, let's say, the relationship with – or the support for groups like Hamas and other terrorist groups? And what I'm really asking here is, does Erdogan really believe, really see Hamas as a resistance movement, or is he trying to satisfy his electoral base? I mean, you gave the answer a while ago because you said you talked about his deep antisemitic views that he has expressed repeatedly.

CIDDI: I would also say that Henri touched upon a lot of the points pertaining to the question, but it's probably worth augmenting some of them. I would say that, look, domestically, I agree Erdogan is vulnerable. And as boisterous and as buoyant as he looks politically, as threatening as he looks on the world stage in rhetoric and tone, I also think he's very vulnerable politically internally, and possibly more vulnerable than we estimate or can calculate.

But I also think that's precisely what makes him very dangerous on the international stage, because he is at some level cornered. His domestic posturings at home, whether it's outward explicit verbal support of Hamas, or material support of Hamas, whilst that may benefit him politically at home, because he preaches on a daily basis, saying you know, you know, “the Israeli state is a genocidal state and the Hamas is essentially a resistance movement to counter that.” That gets him a lot of claps, you know, claps initially. But at this point, you know, some years into a – you know, significant economic degradation in the country where people are literally eating out scraps out of trash bins, that's not going to carry him very far overall.

When several Hamas leaders were killed by the Israelis, and Erdogan put forward a national day of mourning, you could see rumblings within Turkish public opinion saying, “why the hell are we mourning the death of terrorists?” I mean, you saw this play out on national airwaves in Turkey; people were not happy about this.

So, he's trying to instill this sort of distract – distraction amongst the people, to say “our focus should be on, you know, our foreign policy goals and priorities”, and try to sort of put-up Israel as this straw man threat to Turkey. But at a fundamental level you can see this as a deep sign of weakness on his part because he needs essentially anything to deflect at home from, you know, voters focusing on how bad economic conditions are.

And just to put this in context, Turkey – at this point, Argentina was the world record holder for annual inflation. Turkey may have just about stepped up to second, if not first place, close, ties to Venezuela at this point. So, it's pretty grim internally. But another way of answering your question. I would say that's probably the most, I would consider the most important aspect, would be to suggest that, look, our sort of frettings about Turkey at FDD or like-minded organizations – this is not a boutique problem for us.

I mean Turkey is not just an exclusively small problem located in the Eastern Mediterranean. As far as the Greeks or the Cypriots are concerned, this is, you know, I think the European Union should be a little bit more alarmist about this. Washington should be more alarmist about this. Turkey is a regional problem and a threat at a number of levels that is not being taken seriously.

I say that because, take your – pick your region. If it's the Mediterranean, or the Eastern Mediterranean writ large, Turkey is essentially escalating a posture to dominate that region navally and in terms of its naval buildup, but also its continuing and renewed escalatory threats towards the Greek Islands as well as possibly Cyprus going forward. That's unclear at this point, but we can see rumblings already starting.

If you look at Syria, all I see from the perspective of the European Union, or Brussels, let's just put it, is just concern about refugee flows. They're less alert about the fact that Turkey is helping to groom, nurture, and essentially prop up what the Europeans are sometimes calling a “moderate regime” inside of Syria. I cannot for the life of me see what is moderate about a guy who has decades of ties to al-Qaeda, if not the Islamic State. But because they don't know what to do with it, “let's just call him a moderate and invite him to meet with President Macron and other European officials, because if we wish it well, it might just magically appear.”

We're also seeing Turkey as a major enabler of Russian ambitions continuing in Ukraine. We just released a publication today that traces Turkey funneling over $5 billion of Russian monies, which was essentially Russian oligarch money, having free access to international markets, right, under the pretense that that money was coming to Turkey to help develop its nuclear power plants.

And European-American correspondent banks, Citigroup, and J.P. Morgan were implicated in this. The Biden administration was aware of this. Treasury officials wanted to grab those assets. They were prevented doing so by the Biden administration because they didn't want to upset Turkey. This is what I mean about lack of alarmism. It's undermining our sort of ability to counter Russia as it goes on.

And the final thing, I'll say that why we should also be alarmed about this, and this is in the very early stages, again, we've written about this in the last two weeks, is Turkey's potential ambitions to develop nuclear weapons technology is distinct from its nuclear power priorities at home. We are seeing the initial agreement signed between Turkish officials and officials in Niger for uranium sourcing. We don't know where that's leading going forward, but the conversations that we've had, and how we've written them up seems to suggest that there is an ulterior motive that the Turks are interested not simply just remaining conventional in the region, but they have greater aspirations which should be taken more seriously.

ARGIRI: Mr. Kairidis, as Sinan said, Turkey is a regional problem. But does Turkey's alignment with all these actors that we're discussing here today present – create especially unique challenge for countries like Greece, that have remained committed to the NATO alliance, to the European Union, and have maintain excellent relationship both with the U.S. and most countries in the region, in the Middle East?

KAIRIDIS: Well, we have a lot of work ahead of us. And we need to calibrate our narrative and rhetoric to make it more comprehensible to the new guys in Washington, because I believe that a lot will depend on Washington's position in the Middle East. And I don't have much faith in the Europeans as much as I would like to. They don't know the region. They don't understand the power politics of the region. It's like a different code, a different language they have a great difficulty in understanding.

And if the region is left on its own, then Iran's withdrawal and weakening will be to Turkey's benefit for whatever that might bring to regional stability. Turkey is not a Greek problem only, exactly as it was just said. It is a regional problem. It's a problem for Egypt. It's a problem for the Emirates. It's obviously a problem for Israel. It is a problem first and foremost for Armenia or the Kurds. It's a wider problem. And we need to continue working with allies and making sure that Washington understands its interests, that unless we keep it [Turkey] on a tight leash, to put it in few words, Turkey will become even a bigger problem for NATO, for NATO's unity, et cetera.

The last few years, we have had a few successes, thanks to the pressure. The fact that Turkey lifted its veto to Sweden, the fact that Turkey entered into a dialogue with Greece, the fact that it's reversed its unorthodox policy internally and showed some signs of rapprochement with the Kurds were encouraging. Because I think at the end of the day, Erdogan, for all his delusions and delusions of grandeur, is a realist actor who is responsive to cost and benefits and to pressures.

And we just need to make that clear. If he continues to dominate Syria, if we abandon the Kurds there, if we allow him to sign any legal agreement with Syria on Exclusive Economic Zone and bring him in Damascus, then it is up to us to blame for allowing all this. So, my being here today, in this wonderful institution that has done so much to alert us to the risks and dangers and to exit from this complacency that has characterized much of the Western approach to Turkey, is exactly that the call that we need to be alert, we need to be vigilant. We need to continue having it as a priority. Otherwise, we will enable the fleurs du mal, the flowers of evil, to flourish once again. And we cannot afford that.

ARGIRI: Henri, given everything that we've been discussing about Turkey's increasingly independent, disruptive, and unpredictable foreign policy, can you please help me understand: why do we still see people and players here in DC continue to support and even trust Turkey? And of course, we don't know yet if President Trump will withdraw from Syria. But from – if he does, that would be a huge victory for Erdogan. And instead of handing him strategic gifts, how should the U.S. recalibrate its approach?

BARKEY: First of all, is President Trump going to withdraw from Syria? Well, yesterday he stopped minting the penny so he can do just about anything he wants. No, but seriously speaking – first of all, look, Turkey has had very independent foreign policy, and as I tried to explain, kind of a Erdogan-indexed foreign policy that serves him more than maybe the country.

But the relationship between the United States and Turkey is really longstanding. You have to understand that on a daily basis, if you're at the State Department or anywhere else in the U.S. government, you have hundreds and thousands of interactions with Turkish officials on the other side. I mean, it is essentially a very strong – they – well, they have to cooperate. I mean, you have – we have bases there, we have citizens, we have all kinds of things for which we have to continue to talk about.

So, there is a tradition certainly in the State Department of working with Turkey. And, you know, just like on every issue, there are divisions in the government, and maybe some officials, as you said, trust Turkey.

But I think you can't divorce the relationship that is that long and expect it to turn and suddenly became – become adversarial. Yes, there are issues for which they have disagreed.

And look, for the longest part – time, Turkey thought that it could get away with just about everything and decide to buy the S-400s – was many times warned – didn't believe that United States would take action, and United States did take action, and it was really the most significant event, I think, in terms of the recent years between Turkey and United States, that to this day has a very serious impact because it prevents the Turks from acquiring certain things, and it also forces the Turks to try to look at alternatives. But it is not an – a situation where – the Turks are happy about. So, it's not a relationship that's always hunky-dory. That – I mean, I think that's very, very important.

But there is another thing I should – I would like to bring up in this context on Syria, and whether or not U.S. should or should not withdraw. The last time President Trump tried to pull out and there was a reaction in the U.S. government, as you know, the conditions were very different.

We are dealing with a completely different Middle East today. We're dealing with a Middle East where Syria – I don't know if anybody really knows what's going on in Syria. We have a government that's – a friend of mine who was traveling extensively in Syria the last few weeks said to me, "Yes, they control Damascus, homes in Hama, but the rest of the country is not under their control," right?

[Ahmed Hussein al-]Sharaa has decided on his own that it would take four to five years to have a transition. It's really not his call, really. I mean, nobody has been asked in Syria whether or not this is what they want. And we are really at the very beginning of this change in Syria, and there's, I think, probably the realization emerging, both in Washington and elsewhere, that the Kurds in Syria are one of the most stable elements, and therefore don't muck around with something that is working.

And in this – so I will be very surprised if President Trump would remove the troops because it's not just that the Turks will move in but – you have 15,000 fighters – ISIS fighters and 40,000 family members – well, they're – some of – the fighters are in jail – sorry, it's 10,000 fighters and 45,000 family members. And the family members are in camps, and most of the family members are young kids, right, who have been socialized in ISIS and in ISIS literature– what are you going to do with them? The Turks said, "Oh, you know, Sharaa can take care of them." Sharaa can't control the countryside, let alone a force as formidable as ISIS. And the Turks – why will the Turks should take on such a difficult job.

So, I think the thinking on the Kurds is changing. And also, you – in reference to the things I said in the previous segment, the fact that Erdogan is also trying to figure out a way out of his Kurdish impasse at home has a lot to do with – with Rojava.

If he could come up with a compromise whereby the quote-unquote, "PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] fighters" who are in Syria – I mean, you have to – also to remember that the Syrian Defense Forces are between 70,000 and 110,000, which is much greater than, by the way, HTS, et cetera. And so, some of them have foreign – the some of them are foreign fighters, some of them are PKK fighters. You can come up with a situation where the PKK fighters move out and the who, what remains in Syria, purely Syrian SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] fighters.

And that might be a compromise he can – he will sell to the public as saying, "Look what I succeeded in doing," but – but it's not just Syria that's up. We don't know what's going to happen – we don't know what's going to happen in Lebanon, we don't know what's going to happen in Iraq.

So, the administration here has to kind of just sit down and try to look at the situation and try to figure out what it wants to see happen in – because you – one mistake now can unleash a whole series of other consequences that it have – will have no control over. So, I suspect that we won't see a pullout.

ARGIRI: Jonathan, absolutely the circumstances are different this time around than the last time that the – President Trump tried to do the same thing with the U.S. troops over there. But if Trump does pull out of Syria, what would that mean for Turkey's regional ambitions? And would something like that be in line, or be consistent with the U.S. interest?

SCHANZER: Look, I don't think this would be in line with U.S. interests, I think this would be a disaster for U.S. interests. I think what we would probably see is a – an expansion of HTS power in ways that I think we don't want to see.

We keep talking about trying to respect minorities and rule of law and things like that, and I think the moment that you pull American troops out is the moment that you signal to Erdogan and his now – it's very clear this is his proxy – that there is no sheriff any longer, there is no one there that is maintaining order.

I think this would be very likely a disaster for Jordan. That small border shared with Jordan is crucial. Now, we know that, for a time, when the Iranians were effectively in charge of Syria, that they had allowed for the smuggling of Captagon as well as weapons and cash and fighters crossing that border on a regular basis, and that was highly destabilizing.

I think that, look, at – when we look at Erdogan, he's Muslim Brotherhood at the end of the day. And I think that the Turks and the Qataris look at Jordan as an opportunity, they look at Jordan as a vulnerable state that could be compromised, or even toppled. And so, I think that would be a disaster.

I think that the U..S has held the line in ensuring that, for example, ISIS has been contained. I'm still not fully convinced that HTS wants to keep ISIS at bay. I think they could see them as partners in some shape or form. I mean, this was, of course, the origins of the relationship before, and the fact that people are telling us right now that HTS has had a full divorce from ISIS, it's just based on words; it's not truly based on deeds. And so, the US has played a crucial role here in the containment of several crises.

By the way, I would also even just look westward at the border between Syria and Lebanon. This was, of course, another border that was heavily-compromised. The Iranians were using this as a means to smuggle weapons and cash and other resources into Lebanon to support Hezbollah. I don't see why HTS wouldn't continue to do that if it really did seem like they had full control, and no one was watching.

But one thing that I actually want to just come back to here – and I think everyone here has touched on this in the panel today. You know, we continue to talk about Turkey as an ally of the United States. I think to a certain extent, we've lost touch with what it means to call countries allies of ours. In other words, there has to be some kind of a contract where we say this is what we expect of our allies and this is what we're willing to give you in return. A bit of the transactionalism that I think that you mentioned, just about, you know, interests between countries. But I think that we have lost sight of that. I don't think that we make our demands clear. I think we have allowed for countries like Turkey to continue to test the limits of our alliance structure, of our generosity, of our willing to work with them.

Now, in the past, we've seen the United States take steps to slap the wrist of Turkey when it has gone a bit far beyond where we're comfortable. The F-35, for example, was a big one. Actually, even Trump, during his last term, imposing sanctions on members of the Turkish cabinet. There were, I think, important moments.

Now, when you ask, what will Trump do in this next go-around? I hope we see more of that. I think those are the sorts of steps that need to be taken to let Erdogan understand the limitations. I understand he has ambitions, and a lot of countries do. But we need to make sure that if he wants to stay inside the alliance structure that we've created, that there is a limit to what he feels comfortable doing and that he knows that there will be ramifications for stepping beyond that boundary. I don't think that's been made clear recently, and I do hope that Trump is able to convey that in some shape or form.

One last note, though: I will say that after the HTS conquest of Syria, Trump did come out and say something quite interesting. He said, "Well, Erdogan's my friend, but I'm concerned about what has happened in Syria, and this has my attention." Of course, I'm paraphrasing. He said it much more eloquently than I did. But the point being is that I think he is aware of the problems. Now, it's a question of, how do we begin to express that regionally and directly to Erdogan?

ARGIRI: Mr. Kairidis, one last question for you, and then we'll open it up to a Q&A session.

So, you said before that pressure is necessary to contain Erdogan's ambition. So, what are the chances realistically that the new U.S. administration will adopt the stricter policy towards him? But what do you think?

KAIRIDIS: Well, I wouldn't be so pessimistic. I think it's an open question, and it's up to us to do the good job to persuade our American friends that the easiest and cheaper way to serve American interest is to keep him on a leash in order to become, if possible, a more reliable ally. I do not dispute the importance of Turkey, and I did not come here in Washington to say that Turkey is this and that and the other. But for sure, it has demonstrated, to put it mildly, that it has been an unreliable and ambivalent ally.

In order to combat that ambivalence, you need some guarantees on the ground. The hard way is to have American troops on the ground. The easier way is to have your proxies and your friends in the region to do your job. And to put it explicitly – and now that we are coming to the end of – before we open up to the discussion so that everybody understands it – to make sure that both Greece and Israel have equality superiority when it comes to air power and the other instruments of pressure in order to dissuade Erdogan from entertaining any bad thoughts.

I think we have had a few successes the last three/four years, although we could have many more. But it shows that if we continue that path with President Trump, by the way – and I salute him for that opened up back in 2019. He was the U.S. president that threw Turkey out of the co-production agreement for F-35. Because if Turkey today had those 100 F-35s, it would have been a different kind of Turkey, and behaving completely different in the Aegean, in the Eastern Mediterranean, even in the Middle East. The fact that it doesn't is to the benefit of stability, and at the end of the day, to the benefit of Turkey South, because to the Turks, at least, to the simple Turkish folk, this adventurism abroad only feeds polarization, toxicity, authoritarianism at home, and it's not to the benefit of Turkey's – Turkish society.

And at – one point that I keep on having in mind: the demographic question. Erdogan, in his grandeur, illusion of grandeur, as I said, Turkey's important, is strong, but not as strong as Erdogan and other autocrats in Ankara believe. It's not only the economy; it's also the demographic collapse that we have witnessed the last 10 years. It's something that has not been noticed abroad. It hasn't made the headlines. But the most surprising development the last 10 years has been the tremendous decline in Turkish fertility rate, which is 1.5 right now per woman in reproduction age, less than the European average. And it's high in the Kurdish areas, almost three. It's less than Greece in the Western side of Turkey. To show you how much, it's 1.1, 1.15 – very, very low, which means that Turkey will not, will never become a country of 100 million people, and will start declining in 10 years' time. Its population, following, of course, the decline of the rest of Europe.

ARGIRI: OK, and many more question for you guys, but we're running out of time, so we'll move to the Q&A session. And I think that the first question will go to my friend Aykan over there.

(CROSSTALK)

ERDEMIR: Hi. Aykan Erdemir of Anti-Defamation League. Thank you for this great panel. I have a question for Henri to begin with.

I want to follow up on your distinction between Turkey's foreign policy and Erdogan's foreign policy, or whether there is such a distinction. And – which also begs the question, what will be Turkey's foreign policy after Erdogan, right?

There is one data point which challenges the notion that there is a distinction between Erdogan's foreign policy and Turkey's foreign policy, and that is when ADL released its Global 100 survey last month, Turkey, alongside Indonesia, was one of the world's 15 – two non-Arab countries, and the worst 15 countries in the antisemitism index, meaning Indonesia and Turkey are the only two non-Arab countries that had – that are one of the worst – that has one of the worst levels of antisemitism.

And what makes the Turkish case interesting for your perspective is whether you're left wing or right wing or centrist, whether you have elementary school-level of education, secondary school, or tertiary school, the antisemitism level is the same.

And also, globally, Turkey is, if I'm not mistaken, has the highest level of agreement with the statement that Jews have too much control over the government. Which shows that there is surprising, in 2025 – 2024, 2025, there is surprising uniformity across Turkish political and demographic spectrum when it comes to some of the tenets of what we might consider as Islamist or Neo-Ottoman foreign policies.

So, my question to you is has Neo-Ottomanism/Islamism/ultranationalist irredentism, with all its antisemitic undertones, become hegemonic in Turkey, that it's no longer an Erdogan issue but it's a Turkish issue?

And a policy question to Minister Kairidis, my good old friend from Harvard. Which means changing Turkish foreign and security policy into a more cooperative one requires also public diplomacy outreach, right, to remedying the population-level values and attitudes.

Now, what initiatives would you have in mind on the part of Greece? And what initiatives would you also recommend to Israel when it comes to engaging the Turkish public so that there can be a post-Erdogan Turkish foreign and security policy that's not rooted in conspiracies, antisemitism, irredentism, and radicalism?

BARKEY: Look, I would not take the guise of antisemitism necessarily as an indicator for the convergence of Turkish and Erdogan's foreign policy. I mean, when – there's so much daily propaganda on that issue.

I mean, let me give you a very pertinent example: when President Trump made his suggestion about what to do with Gaza, in – interestingly, Erdogan did not say anything, and the opposition went on the attack. There was a pro-Palestine demonstration that the opposition organized the other day, and they kept saying, "You're not saying anything, you're not saying anything to Erdogan."

And I think what Erdogan was trying to do, he's trying to figure out “how am I going to answer that?”, given the fact that we are dealing with essentially a new American President – well, an old-new American President who's quite unpredictable.

And finally, he came up with a solution, and basically, he said he condemned unequivocally what Trump said, but he had – he attributed it to the Zionist lobby that made Trump say this, right? To any – I mean, in a way – but the point is this – antisemitism is being used but it doesn't necessarily mean that Turkish foreign policy is necessarily falling. The antisemitism in Turkey has always been there.

And given the propaganda, look, Erdogan blames the United States for everything in Turkey – bad economy, egg prices, you name it. When you do surveys in Turkey and you ask which country is the greatest threat to Turkey, 70 percent of the Turkish population says the United States, OK? That doesn't necessarily mean that there's, again, a convergence. It's just that he's using this for his own ends and – I don't – I won't take those two points essentially as truth.

And Erdogan's – by the way, Erdogan's foreign policy over time has been very – has changed all – I mean, he was pro-Israel at the beginning, then he – going that – against Israel, then he tried to make up relations with Israel again, because he – depending on the situation, he changes, right?

And let's be honest, there – there's been a lot of Israeli tourists and Israeli businesses that established themselves in Turkey in – before the Hamas war, and now they've all gone, but they – even though there was a great deal of antisemitism, Israelis were working quite well in Turkey.

So, I'm not really sure that that's much of an – as an indicator.

KAIRIDIS: I understand where Henri comes from and I understand the distinction, but I think there is a danger in making too much of that distinction, as there is a danger in making too much of – and blame the person of Trump, for example, for the changes in U.S. policies abroad. I think there are continuities as well and there are structural issues, and that these leaders are products of their times and accelerators of changes that were bound to happen as well. So, I would say that the truth is somewhere in the middle, rather than this distinction between Erdogan policy and Turkey's policy, American policy and Trump policy, and we have a much more nuanced kind of approach.

Now, if I were to choose one in the – I was a minister for one year. If I were to choose one tangible measure that I really took in that regard, was to persuade my European colleagues in introducing a visa facilitation program with Schengen for Turkey's citizens visiting Greek islands. It was attacked by nationalists in my country thinking that the Turks are coming to conquer.

It was a very successful initiative that increased 175 percent the Turkish visitors in Greek islands last year and brought an additional almost half a billion euros of revenues for the local economies, and it sent a very powerful signal to the Turkish in bringing the two sides closer together and in sending a signal of respect for Turks – for Turkish citizens.

Turkish citizens rightly feel being disrespected by the border controls and the long Schengen – visa Schengen procedures they have to go through. It was very difficult to persuade my German colleagues, because if you don't know it, in Germany, the second largest number of asylum seekers are Turks these days. And the last thing the very embattled Scholz coalition government's needs is to make it easier for Turks to travel into Europe.

And there was huge resistance, but nevertheless, I managed to persuade them because you need the unanimous decision and the commission to proceed with that measure. To the point where now I'm meeting with the hawks of the previous Erdogan government, you know. Akar and Çavuşoğlu, who Erdogan has sparked to the parliament. And I am the head of the, Endy forgot to mention, Endy mentioned all my previous titles and not the current ones, but it's OK, I forgive him.

So...

ARGIRI: I just need to ensure that we're going to get another one last question.

KAIRIDIS: As head of the Greek NATO delegation and head of the Greek Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, I'm meeting with these guys who are now they left. Now you have new people. Yerlikaya and, Fidan, much more polished compared to Akar, right? So, they're very angry that all the money comes to Greek islands and the Turkey hotel owners complain. But I think this is how we should proceed with Turkey. Not only...

(UNKNOWN): We have a question here.

KAIRIDIS: ... to give them money and bribe them, but respect...

(UNKNOWN): (Inaudible), just so we...

KAIRIDIS: (Inaudible) I'm not going to speak again.

KALPADAKIS: Hello, From the Alexis Tsipras Institute, I had one comment and two questions.

So, your comment reminded me your, the reference was that President Trump would leave a vacuum in the area that possibly would be filled. I think it's a bit more dangerous than that. Our experience from 2019, in October 2019 was that when he didn't find support from the French, the British, the Germans on the ground in Syria, he called President Erdogan had a talk with him. And after that talk, gave him a green light for a mild incursion, as he said, not a big scale incursion, but a mild incursion, which changed the situation completely.

So, not only is there the threat that he'll leave a vacuum, but it's that he'll actually consider to delegate a role to Turkey, as he did in 2019, where he gave a green light for Turkey to be there. And when he was asked about it, he said, “well, the French wouldn't help, the British wouldn't help, the Germans wouldn't help. Turkey can have boots on the ground.”

The – what ensued after that was a terrible period also for Greek-Turkish relations. We had the illegal Turkish Libya agreement that we talked about before. We had the migration crisis in Everest [?], which was successfully confronted by the Greek government. We had the Oruç Reis crisis.

So, I think the risk is that the relationship between Trump and Erdogan in Syria, just like it was in 2019, will give a blank check, or at least more flexibility, to Turkey to move around in the Eastern Mediterranean with a tolerance from the Trump administration.

Based on that, three questions. First of all, the foreign minister of Greece was in Syria yesterday, and I'd like to ask Minister Kairidis.

KALPADAKIS: I'll be fast.

ARGIRI: We have only two minutes.

KALPADAKIS: Can Greece have a role in Syria, and how important could that be? And secondly, how important can Israel be in protecting the Kurds in Syria?

Thank you.

ARGIRI: Yes, Jonathan.

SCHANZER: I can answer this – the second question. But actually, one brief comment on the vacuum and the delegation of Turkey. A key component of that is the fundamental distrust that exists between the Western European powers and the Trump administration. The Trump administration asked Europe to start spending more in NATO, to prepare for a Russian invasion. They thumbed their nose at him. They never took him seriously. And they are now reaping the whirlwind because they never thought he'd come back.

And we're going to see a very interesting dynamic play out between the Western Europeans and Trump. And I do think that how that is resolved could have immense influence on how Turkey and the US work together as it relates to this vacuum.

As it relates to the Kurds. I think the Israelis have stated very clearly that they want to see the Kurds remain in northern Syria. They want to see them protected. But I will say that when you look at the long list of priorities that the Israelis have, with Iran being at the top and all the other chaos that surrounds them in the region, the Kurds fall to a much lower priority.

And so, I don't think the Kurds can rely on the Israelis for long term support. They may get training. They may get intelligence. They may even get weapons, but don't expect the Israelis to intervene on their behalf.

ARGIRI: Mr. Kairidis, we need to stay on time, so you have one minute.

KAIRIDIS: Because we are on the record, I will keep the one minute, and I will not say much. But if there was a need for our Syrian friends to be reminded that EU aid and EU policy needs Athens' consent, you must be sure that the reminder is there.

And therefore, it was a productive meeting in Damascus with our foreign minister. We take special interest in the fate of Christians and the Christian communities of Syria for obvious reasons. And there is renewed now contacts with Antioch and the various other churches in Syria. The Assyrians, et cetera, et cetera, as you know.

ARGIRI: You kept your promise. Thank you, gentlemen, for this wonderful discussion.

Thank you all for being here for those watching online. And thanks again to the FDD.

END