



After Iran: Is Erdogan's Turkey the Middle East's Next Great Threat?

August 20, 2026

Featuring Steven A. Cook and Jonathan Schanzer

Hosted by Mark Dubowitz

DUBOWITZ: Steven Cook, Jon Schanzer, welcome to *The Iran Breakdown*. Great to have you both. Thanks, both.

COOK: Thanks for having me.

DUBOWITZ: No, it's great to have you both. I know you're good friends and you're both obviously phenomenal experts of the Middle East and of Turkey specifically. And I know there'll be a lot of playful banter based on sports rivalries. Steve, you're from Long Island. Jon's a Philly boy. So I know you have a lot in common, but also a lot that divides you. But I think on the episode, what I really want to do in terms of framing is not really talk about Turkey-Israel relations as much as around a bigger question as Iran weakens. Is Turkey now positioning itself to become the next great revisionist power in the Middle East? And so maybe we could jump off on that issue. A week in Iran, a growing Turkey, a NATO ally, but a problematic leader in Erdogan. Jon Schanzer, you want to take that question first?

SCHANZER: Yeah. I mean, look, I think the first thing that we need to understand is that the Iranian regime for many years was projecting power across the region to the great consternation of Sunni powers. In other words, this is the minority Shiites that are projecting power all around the Middle East, and they represent, what, 20 percent of the Muslim world. This didn't sit well with the Turks who were the superpower from the Muslim world before the current era. And by the way, it didn't sit well with the Saudis, it didn't sit well with the Pakistanis, and we can get to all of that. But with the Iranians projecting power and threatening everybody and bullying all the region, primarily Sunny states, taking over Sunni states or the countries like Lebanon where Sunnis were a significant part, there was this sense that things were not right. The Turks, I think, have taken this moment to try to write what they believe was wrong.

And when you think about what happened on the eve of October 7th and the way in which the Iranians had surrounded Israel with what we call now the ring of fire, when I look at where the Turks are right now, I think they've reconstituted the ring of fire. And it's not necessarily only for the attacking of Israel, but it is the projection of Turkish power all over the region. So I mean from Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Horn of Africa, Eastern Med, Northern Cyprus, the Turks are in all of those places, and it does start to raise a question, what do they want? What are they after?

DUBOWITZ: Okay.

COOK: Yeah, I think just to add a couple points here and dive a little deeper on a couple of them. First, I think it's clear that the Turks see Israel as its primary regional rival and have worked very hard over the course of the last three years and even before to isolate Israel in the region. What really didn't sit well with the Turks was the Abraham Accords, which isolated Turkey, which the aim was to not include Turkey in the Abraham Accords and follow on things like I2U2, the Israel, India, US, UAE, of which IMEC, the India, Middle East, Europe economic corridor purposely did not include Turkey and terminated over land via Israel and then to Cyprus and Greece. So the Turks had taken the opportunity, the regional wars that began on October 7th, to push back on this, repair its relations with countries that it had alienated in an effort to confront the exercise of Israeli power.

Now, I think on the question of Iran and Turkey, the Turks have never demonstrated a willingness to really confront Iran in the way that American administrations of both parties have wanted to. They famous for helping the Iranians skirt sanctions. They've always played, I think, both ends of the stick here. Throughout the 2010s, every time Erdogan was in trouble with the United States, he'd run off to Tehran and have a nice meeting with President Ahmadinejad or whoever was in power in Turkey and sort of bless the nuclear program, say, "Well, it's not aimed at us," and so on and so forth. So I think the Turks look at Iran as a strategic competitor. Now that it has been weakened, however, Turkey is looking to fulfill that kind of Turkish-Islamist goal of leading the region. And this Mecca agreement can be seen in that context. Since the late 1960s and the manifestation of the Turkish Islamist movement under Necmettin Erbakan, who was a mentor to Erdogan, there has been talk in Islamist circles about a "Muslim NATO." Turkish Islamists didn't like NATO at all.



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They thought that Turkey's appropriate place was leading the Muslim world. And within that, there should be a Muslim NATO of all the big countries in the region, Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, Turkey of course, and others to be the leading members of that group. I think circumstances have led them to the Mecca agreement because the Saudis were interested in something new, the Pakistanis are playing a role. And the Mecca agreement I think means something somewhat different to the Turks than it does to the Saudis, for example. So this is, I think, the next big challenge in the region. And what makes it harder is, as Jonathan said, it's a NATO ally. It's not much of a partner, but it is a NATO ally.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So I want to step back before we get back into the geopolitics and just look at the ideological question, because first time I was ever in Turkey was 1991 with a backpack, and I was backpacking for six weeks all around Turkey.

COOK: Oh my God, same.

DUBOWITZ: It was a year—

COOK: Later, October 1992.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Well, so I mean, I think because we're old enough, the three of us, we have a broader historical lens to evaluate what has happened to Turkey. And I just remember the Turkey of 1991, secular, pro-American, actually quite pro-Israel. And then going back for years after that, you just watched this transformation of Turkey, particularly when Erdogan and the AKP came into power. And so I want to ask both of you the Islamist question. How much of Erdogan's foreign policy is traditional Turkish nationalism and great power ambition? How much is genuinely ideological? How much is rooted in political Islam and the Muslim brotherhood? So Jon, you've obviously always had what you call the Hamas test. If you're embracing Hamas, that's a problem, and that speaks poorly of who you are. So when Ankara embraces Hamas, is that tactical statecraft? Is that ideological affinity? How do you evaluate the ideological position of today's Turkey?

SCHANZER: Oh, it is the question to ask. And first, let me just say that Turkey was, I think for all of us, the place where if you were traveling around the rest of the region and going to terrible places, Turkey was the antidote to that. I remember leaving Iraq or leaving Yemen and going to Turkey, and that's the place where you could have a drink and you can let your hair down for those of us that have it. And you could relax; you could take it easy. And I mean, I think, Mark, you and I attended weddings there even 15 years ago, and it's changing. It's changing rapidly. The culture of the place women are now, they're putting veils on, they're putting hijab on. There is a sense that the society is shifting. Now, Islam is in and of itself not the problem. In my view, it's that cocktail of nationalism and Islamism.

It's a very powerful cocktail. Taken in isolation, each one can be a serious motivator of the wrong kinds of policies. Mash them together and you start to get a sense of what Turkey is up to here. They are trying right now to court Islamist countries, Muslim countries all around the world. They're becoming more and more Arab. There is actually a debate right now about whether Turkey belongs in, like when you go to the State Department or the Pentagon, they don't really belong in Europe any longer. There was always this talk about Turkey becoming part of the EU. Nobody really thinks that any longer because the country has become so Islamist in its orientation. And so yes, it's a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, partners with the Qataris who are the primary patron of the Muslim Brotherhood, supporters of Hamas. But I got to tell you also, I'm talking about support for Al-Qaeda, support for the Taliban, support for the Islamic state, support for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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It has been an Islamist bulwark over the last 15, 20 years as the country has gone down this road. It is incredibly dangerous in my view, and it actually does really begin to ask the question of should they still be a NATO? If there was even a mechanism for removing a country from NATO, would this be our first choice? I think the answer is yes. But I think just to bring it back to the point that you mentioned, Mark, I do have this test that any country that is a full-throated backer of Hamas, it's a sign that they're going down the wrong path from a policy perspective. They've openly embraced violence. They've openly embraced antisemitism. They've openly embraced Islamism. And the Turks, really since 2010, 2011, it was actually 2011 was the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap. If we all remember that this was the Israeli soldier who was being held by Hamas, and the Israelis swapped a thousand Hamas prisoners for his life.

And a large number of Hamas prisoners went to Turkey. They established a significant base there, financial, operational, fundraising, the whole thing. They've been there now for a long time, and it is the largest external base for Hamas outside of Gaza in the world. That's Turkey for you right there.

DUBOWITZ: All right, so Steven, Jon's talking about this very much as an Islamist Republic and Erdogan as an Islamist ideologue. But I think you've talked about this in the past. I think you think that there should be a little bit more nuance to this analysis that Erdogan is not necessarily Muslim brotherhood and Turkey's not necessarily the military wing of the global Muslim brotherhood. Is that right?

COOK: Yeah. I mean, Jon not noted for his nuance. So look, I think it's my responsibility to add some here. In all seriousness though, I mean, it's not really surprising to me what the AKP has been able to accomplish in Turkey, which is the Islamization without it becoming a theocracy, the Islamization of political and social institutions of the country. And that's why it seems for oldsters like us who are tramping around Turkey in our 20s to go back there over this long period of AKP rule, why it seems so different. Why on Istiklal Caddesi and the heart of what was secular Istanbul, you can't drink a beer outside any longer. It's much, much harder to do that. And that's because when I was living in Turkey in 2000, I lived there for a long period of time. It dawned on me that the camelist secularization of the country was miles, miles, miles wide, but really less than an inch deep.

And if you scratched a Turk, you'd find a good Muslim. And the AKP came to power shortly thereafter with a positive message about Turkish power, Turkish prosperity, and piety. And they proceeded along those lines. Somewhere not that long thereafter, 2005, 2006, the AKP made contact with Hamas. And I remember when Khaled Meshal showed up in Ankara for the first time, he met with Abdullah Gul, who was then the foreign minister at AKP party headquarters. And I remember at the time talking to AKP interlocutors and I said, why would you want to get in bed with Hamas? These are people who bomb pizza places, civilians, target civilians specifically, and so on and so forth. And they had this kind of yen, this ideological thing in which they saw Hamas much like them, that they were a put-upon Islamist movement that was widely popular, but were being kept down.

And there was really kind of no talking them out of this. This was an ideological position. And then as Jonathan pointed out after 2011, the AKP Erdogan allowed Hamas to basically set up in Istanbul and use Turkey as a base, avail itself of the Turkish financial system. And what you see is this kind of increasing Islamization along with Turkish nationalism affecting Turkish foreign policy. So after the Arab uprisings, Erdogan positioned himself as a leader of Islamist movements around the region. I remember I was in Cairo when he arrived for a visit after Hosni Mubarak fell and the Muslim Brotherhood pulled out all the stops to welcome him. He had been to Tunisia any number of times. And what was odd about this was that, and I think actually the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood understood this because there were never really good relations between Turkish Islamists and the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood to the brotherhood in Egypt.



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These guys, they were too nationalists, they were too liberal, they weren't actually Islamists. Because Turkish Islamism comes from an entirely different tradition called National View in Turkish. But Erdogan and people around him at the time, Ahmet Davutoglu and others saw this opportunity to advance Turkish national interests and also satisfy their ideological inclinations by positioning themselves as leaders of the region and sort of becoming the patrons of Islamist parties around the region. More often than not, those parties were affiliated with the Muslim brotherhood. And that's where you get that now with the region greatly, greatly changed as a result of the last three years. I think that Erdogan senses an opportunity, as we were just talking about, to advance Turkey's, both its national interests and to present itself as a leader of the Muslim world and not just as a leader of the region.

SCHANZER: So one thing I just—Yeah, it's interesting. Oh—

DUBOWITZ: Go ahead, Jon. Go ahead.

SCHANZER: Oh, I was just going to say, Steven talking about Erdogan and Egypt in the wake of the Arab spring. I mean, I think that was actually a really important moment. There was this massacre carried out by the Egyptian regime. There had been a sit-in of the Muslim Brotherhood in this, it was called Rabaa Square, meaning fourth. And what Erdogan started to do in commemoration of those that were killed and beaten, the four-finger salute. And he started doing that for years. I mean, it was his signature and it was like, I don't know, a secret message or maybe not so secret, but it was a way of communicating with the Muslim brotherhood. And as the Muslim brotherhood began to threaten to topple other governments all around the region, talking about Tunisia and Syria and elsewhere, you kept seeing Erdogan come out there and actually flash that four-finger salute and talk about the Islamists and their position in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, and how the Muslim brotherhood needed to ascend.

This was a common theme for quite a while here. Now, I don't know what happened. Erdogan's, maybe Steven knows why the four-finger salute has since gone away, but the same rhetoric of supporting the brotherhood of supporting Islamist movements has only soared. And Erdogan has really leaned into this. And it's all happened, by the way, as he has become one of the figures in the Middle East. It reminds me quite a bit of all those figures that were getting toppled during the Arab world. He's now 20 years into his tenure as the leader of Turkey. Actually, what is it? 23 years, I think it is at this point. And so he was out there trying to take down these autocrats, and now he's become one of them, but they love him anyway because he continues to support the Islamist movements around the region, not just Hamas, but Muslim Brotherhood factions all across the Middle East.

And that of course could potentially put him in the crosshairs with the Trump administration, but it has not yet done so.

COOK: He's actually more popular outside of Turkey than he is inside of Turkey where people have. The AKP came to power in November 2002 and Erdogan's first stint as prime minister began in March of the following year. It's more than the use of the Rabaa sign actually not long after the coup in Egypt that brought Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power and ended the brief experiment in Muslim Brotherhood Rule in Egypt. School girls in Ankara would every day go up, walk from their school, stop in front of the US Embassy, offer the Rabaa sign, and then continue up the street. This is a main thoroughfare in Ankara actually called Kennedy Caddesi. And then they would continue up the street towards the Egyptian Embassy and stop in front of the Egyptian Embassy and give the Rabba sign. In fact, I mean, Erdogan allowed the brotherhood to set up a base in Turkey, use Turkish media, use all these things to try to undermine the legitimacy of the new regime in Egypt.



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That's changed markedly because Erdogan's sort of aggressive posture around the region was kept in check by Egypt, Israel, France, Cyprus, and Greece, which all kind of came together during this period of aggressive Turkish moves in the Mediterranean to put together a grouping. Some of it formalized in the Eastern Mediterranean gas forum and some of it informal. You drew in the Emiratis; it drew in the Saudis as well. In Erdogan's sort of aggressive posture in the region, the return on his investment was nothing. And so he went about repairing his relations with many of these countries, including Israel in the summer before the Hamas attacks in October 2023. There was a normalization of relations between Israel and Turkey, which was striking. I remember the Israeli foreign ministry putting out TikTok videos of Israelis going, "See you in Istanbul." I remember messaging one of my friends in the ministry and saying, "Hey man, the second you guys are going to have to do something in Gaza, you guys are Hitler." And that's exactly what had happened.

But I think that, yes, it has been something to watch as Erdogan has positioned himself as a leader in the region and positioned himself as an Islamist leader in the region without the AKP actually being part of this kind of broad Muslim brotherhood network around the region and in fact around the world. He sees this opportunity. It really is this kind of fusion of Islamism and nationalism and his own politics and his own political hide. I mean, imagine you're Erdogan in July of 2013, and there's a coup in Egypt against an Islamist government, and you preside over a country with a history of coups, and you lead an Islamist party. I think this set off all kinds of alarm bells within the AKP. And so they moved aggressively to support the brotherhood and to try to denounce this and, in the process, wrecked its relations with the Saudis, the Emirates, the Israelis over this issue.

Now Jonathan, I'm rambling a little bit here, but I just want to pick up on this thing that Jonathan said about the Trump administration and Erdogan.

It's kind of extraordinary. Erdogan, a strong man who has mimicked the tactics of people like Hosni Mubarak and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. I was witness to the Gezi Park protests in 2013. I had also been in Tahrir Square in 2011, and young Turks were saying very similar things about young Egyptians, about the arbitrary power and not having a voice and wanting to have more say in their society. And Erdogan's only kind of perfected this in the ensuing decade. Trump doesn't have any real commitment to human rights, but he does seemingly not like Islamists except for Erdogan who he has a good personal relationship with. And that's what makes policymaking on Turkey extremely difficult now because as everybody's pointed out, the Turks are a NATO ally, but not much of a partner. You get no hearing from the Trump administration about what Turkey has done in various places around the region that has undermined American efforts or sought to undermine American efforts because the president has a good personal relationship with his Turkish counterpart.

DUBOWITZ: What I love about having both of you on is I can just let you talk. I went and got a couple cups of coffee, did some housework, called my wife, and I'm back. So let me turn to the question of Turkey and Iran. It seems to me that Erdogan has replaced his kind of four-finger salute with a one-finger salute, and that's the middle finger, which I think a boy from Long Island and another boy from Philly are probably very familiar with. Very. But it seems to be this basically like I'm the major dome of the Middle East and the Iranians have been significantly weakened by American and Israeli power. And so now I'm stepping into the void. I guess the question I have is, well, first, is Turkey becoming the next Iran? And what I mean is not in the sense of becoming another Islamic republic but certainly is a large ambitious regional power that's really using Islamist movements and military deployments and economic influence, and of course anti-Israel politics to build a significant sphere of influence in the Middle East.

And certainly, all of us have been in Israel and have talked to Israelis, and I think the Israeli establishment is really seeing Turkey as its principle long-term regional competitor. I mean, obviously still has a lot of ways to go with the Iranians, but they're certainly very concerned about Erdogan's Turkey.



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Jon, talk a little bit about that in terms of your conversations with Israelis and how they're seeing the Turkish threat. And then Steve, I want to go back to you because I think you've previously said that Israeli security professionals don't want to define Turkey as an enemy state, because obviously that could lead to a serious conflagration. So maybe let's move into the question of if this is a rising Turkey that is replacing Iran, what does this mean for Israel?

SCHANZER: So look, first of all, I think I just need to acknowledge that Mark, you and I, we're not well-loved in Turkey. When we exposed the Iranian, what was then known as the gas-for-gold scheme, this was 2012 to 2016, they moved \$20 billion for the Iranian regime in cash and gold. You and I, Mark, worked with the Department of Justice. We flagged this with them, we worked with them, and the Turks became aware of our involvement. And as a result, you and I have both been identified as terrorists, coup plotters and members of the sex cult. I like to always remind folks that two out of three of those are false. And look, they've been going after us.

DUBOWITZ: Jon, speak for yourself, by the way. I think the two out of three are different for both of us.

SCHANZER: It may be. I didn't say which two and which of the two are actually false. We can divide and conquer there. And yes, Steven, you're missing out. Next time you want to go to Turkey, let us know. We'll set you up. But we've been dealing with this actually for a while. If we're targeting Turkey support for the Islamic state, Turkey support for Hamas, Turkey support for Al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front, the Islamic Republic of Iran, all of this has been going on for quite some time. If you ask me, the Turks have actually already filled the void of the next Iran. They've been doing it for a very long time. This has been going on for 15, 20 years. It's a question of pace. And what I would argue is that right now we're watching the pace quicken because the Islamic Republic is now on its way, I hope, on its way out, but certainly it's weaker than it ever was.

The Turks right now see this opportunity to assert itself as we talk about it as the Neo-Ottoman Empire, this idea that they are going to fill a void and reclaim the greatness of what was once. And you can see the way in which they are imposing themselves. And I mentioned earlier, I mean, so they've got a foothold in Gaza with Hamas. They've been supporting Hamas financially, diplomatically for a long time. They've actually been threatening to fight Israel on behalf of Hamas. They've actually called for a pan-Islamic army to be organized, to fight against Israel as this has all been going on. They have started to fund Hezbollah, which is shocking. And I've heard this now from Lebanese Cypriots and Israelis. I don't think there's any doubt about it any longer. They're providing weapons and cash to what was once only an Iranian proxy because they want influence in Lebanon.

This is a former sanjak, as they called it, a governorate of the Ottoman Empire. They'd like to reassert that again, and they're actually telling Lebanese diplomats that this is their goal. They own the government of Syria. We've all seen the reports in recent days. The Israelis had to strife an airfield in Northwest Syria because the Turks are literally trying to put their own weapons and soldiers on the ground in there, but they already have enormous influence with the al-Sharaa government. They are fighting the Kurds in Northern Iraq. They have thousands of troops based in Qatar. They are crawling all over the horn of Africa. It is remarkable how much they have established in terms of facts on the ground with militias sponsored by private intelligence firms that are in the midst of trying to transform Africa into something that is a playground for the Turks.



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They're in Libya. They're increasingly doing military exercises with the Egyptians. They're harassing ships, Greek ships and Cypriot ships in the Eastern Med. And they've got a squadron of, or half a squadron, I guess it is, of F - 16s in Northern Cyprus, some 200 miles away from Israel. They have absolutely flooded the zone. And when I look at, if you ask me, are they the next Iran? Yeah. I mean, they're Islamist, they're anti-West, they are pro-jihadists, and they have established that ring of fire all over the region. That Shiite Crescent has now dissolved or it's dissolving in real time with the Turks backfilling as much as they possibly can across the region. You've heard people like Yair Lapid in Israel talk about the Turkish threat, Naftali Bennett, former prime minister, actually both of these men, former prime ministers talking about this threat, it is increasingly on the radar in Israel that they're going to have to do more to counter this new threat.

The challenge, of course, is that this is not some garbage country. This is the second largest army in NATO. They've got a drone industry; they've got ballistic missiles. They're a real country as opposed to what I would argue with the Islamic Republic. I mean, they were a basket case and they still are. The Turks have a lot more that they bring to the table. And I got to say, I don't like the idea that the Israelis and the Turks could cross swords, whether in the air over the Med, whether on the ocean or in Syria, which is I think actually increasingly likely because both of these countries are vying for some kind of military control over the skies or even on the ground.

DUBOWITZ: So Steven, you accused Jon of not having enough nuance. So I hope that you're going to bring some nuance to his assessment and make us feel better that the Islamic Republic of Turkey, or what's increasingly becoming one, is not a grave threat to Israel and is not a significant challenge to the United States and the Middle East and to NATO in general. So make us feel a bit better. What's Jon getting wrong in that assessment?

COOK: Well, I mean, I think it's just really a matter of emphasis here. Jon has kind of laid out where the Turks are. Turkey is an ambitious power that has sought, and I've said it at least three times before, sought to put itself out as a leader of the Muslim world and a leader in the region. And it feels very uncomfortable with the exercise of Israeli power, both at a kind of national interest level as well as an ideological level. And so that is driving, those two things are kind of driving Turkey's presence in the horn, its aggressive posture in the Eastern Mediterranean, its efforts to buy itself some influence in Lebanon where it didn't have that influence before, is an effort to keep Israeli power in check. Now, I have heard what Yair Lapid has said. I've heard what Naftali Bennett said, it is an enemy state.

I haven't heard anybody from the security establishment say that. That may be just their kind of natural caution about things. They have lots of things on their agenda at the moment. But it is certainly the case that the Israeli security establishment has a new interest in Turkey and that the country is sort of gearing up in a variety of ways to better understand what's happening in Turkey, trying to look for people in Israel with expertise on Turkey, Turkish language skills, and all of those things, because they see that what is happening around the region, that their enemy, Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, they've all been relatively weakened, but there is this other rising ambitious power that seeks to dominate the region, that it clearly has conflicting interests and conflicting ideological and a hostile ideological view. And so again, I'll take my cues from the Israelis, and they are increasingly seeing Turkey as a threat.

And I think the fact that Turkey is a NATO ally is a real challenge for the Israelis in meeting the threat that they perceive, not just in the fact that Turkey has the second largest military in NATO. I mean, numbers may or may not matter. It may be big. It may not be as proficient as people suspect it might be. Of course, the Turks have been very innovative in terms of drone warfare. The presence on Cyprus is being militarized. So it is a major challenge, but because it's a NATO ally, it's harder for the Israelis to target Turkey than it is, for example, to target Iran. So I'm not going to say, "No, this isn't a problem. I'm not going to make you feel better." I think this is the next challenge for Israeli policymakers, and it's going to put the United States in a difficult situation.



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Being a NATO ally is very, very important, and there are very important ties between the United States and Israel. And so far, we haven't seen the United States play rough here or try to establish some sort of deescalation. We know that the US ambassador to Turkey has essentially taken on Turkish talking points and has helped encourage much of Turkey's positioning around the region by reinforcing for Turkish leaders how important they are, how critical they are to the United States, what an important power they are by dismissing Turkey's domestic politics, which are profoundly authoritarian, those kinds of things. And he hasn't hid his hostility towards the exercise of Israeli power around the region either. So we've got this, as I said, this rising ambitious power in the region. You've got Israel, a important, powerful country in the region. They have conflicting interests, and the United States who is his critical partner to both sort of checked out on this issue, if not encouraging the Turks.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Jon, let's talk about NATO because obviously Steve has talked about the elephant in the room. I mean, is Turkey still an American ally in any meaningful sense, or is this simply a country that happens for historical reasons to belong to NATO? If Turkey were not in NATO today, would the United States and Europe for that matter even admit Erdogan's Turkey? And to Steve's point, at what point does NATO membership become a shield that's allowing Erdogan to pursue these policies that are against American interests and doing so without paying any normal strategic price? Or the flip side of that is if you were going to steal man President Trump's case, Trump would say, "Because I have a great relationship with Erdogan, because he's my best friend in the Muslim world, I have leverage over him, and I'm the only one that is preventing hot war between Israel and Turkey, including flashpoints like we just saw in Syria a couple days ago." Well—

SCHANZER: So first, let it be known for the record that you gave Stephen Cook an opportunity to slap me around and he declined. And I think it's a sign of my deterrence. I mean, he's afraid of me, and I think let's just understand that. But okay, set that aside. A few things that I think we need to understand about the Turks and where they belong in NATO or if they belong in NATO. This is a country that has, we've talked about this, the country was involved directly in a massive money laundering scheme that undermined our sanctions against Iran between 2012 and 2015. They acquired the S400 air defense system made by the Russians, and that's a big no-no for NATO. That's why they got kicked out of the F-35 Advanced Fighter Jet Program because they had violated American law, they had violated American policy, they had violated NATO policy.

They're sponsors of Hamas, sponsors of Al-Qaeda, sponsors of the Muslim Brotherhood. Democracy at home has just gone. It's no longer. I mean, I think we can say this, that this is now a full-on dictatorship run by Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This guy is not. I mean, he has shut down free speech. He has crushed the media. He's crushed the judiciary. He's purged the military. This is not any longer a country that deserves to be allied with NATO or with the United States for that matter. We sort of joke that Turkey, there are all these rules about admission, but there are no rules for how to eject a country from NATO. It's like the Hotel California, you can check out, but you can't leave. The Turks have checked out a long time ago, and yet there's no way to get rid of them. And this is the part that I just don't understand.

I mean, Steven was just talking about Tom Barrack, the US ambassador to Turkey. This guy does not seem to want to acknowledge any of the problems that I've just mentioned. Seems to be just giving a full embrace to the Turks in all of their Islamist splendor. And I just don't understand what's going on here because it is of course a challenge to the American-led regional order. It is of course a challenge to America's most important ally in Israel. It's a challenge to the Greeks. It's a challenge to the Cypriots. It's a challenge to the Kurds. I mean, this is a regional destabilizing factor that we need to all be aware of here, and it's only getting worse. Now, if you talk to Tom Barrack, he will tell you that Israel has been destabilizing the region because look, they've been dropping bombs in Lebanon, in Gaza, in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen, in Iran.



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I mean, they're looking around and they're saying, "Okay, Israel, they're flexing. We need to do something in response." The thing is, the Turks were never directly threatened by the Israelis. They've not been threatened by American foreign policy in Iran. This does not impact them at all, and yet they've decided to assert themselves, and I think it's just yet another sign that they don't belong in this alliance structure. In fact, let's just be clear, they've just chosen a new one. They've just chosen to ally themselves with the Pakistanis and the Saudis in this sort of muscular Sunni projection of power across the region. It does make you wonder, do they even want to be part of NATO or are they just sort of free riding for the moment? And I think the answer's probably yes.

COOK: I think, let me just get in on this for a second, Mark. Jon is spot on here that Turkey is a NATO ally, but it has hardly been a partner in the last 15 years or so. The S400 is a perfect example of this. They were demanding from the Obama administration, the patriot system, but with technology offsets that the United States doesn't give to anybody. I think the only country that gets those kind of technology offsets is the UK, kind of our cousins across the pond. And we said no. And the Turks went to the Russians and were warned. Were warned that they would get kicked out of the F-35 program if they acquired the S-400. They did it anyway. And I remember the Turkish press the day the first components of the S-400 arrived in Ankara was all full of lists of NATO aircraft that the S400 could shoot down.

It was kind of mind-boggling because here was a member of NATO, but it seems clear from Erdogan's worldview and his ambitions that the exercise of American power in and around the Middle East is not, from his perspective, in the best interest of Turkey. And that's why he has sought to undermine American power in a variety of places. But separate out the United States for a second. The Europeans, Turkey occupies a third of the Republic of Cyprus, a member of the EU, not a NATO member, but still occupies a third of that country, has moved anywhere from 150 to 300,000 Turks from Turkey to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a country that no one recognizes other than Turkey, to shift the demographic balance of the region and is now proceeding to militarize that part of the island. Something that no one ever talks about but is a destabilizing factor along NATO's southern flank.

So it strikes me that yes, Turkey is a NATO ally. It plays that card. It has played a role with Ukraine early on supplying drones. By the way, the Ukrainians had to buy them and working out a grain deal so that Ukrainian grain could get out to the world and not destabilize big countries like Egypt that rely on it and so on and so forth. But it's also had a very ambiguous relationship with Russia. Basically, opened its doors economically to Russia. Not the only country in the world that's up, but still a NATO ally opening its doors to Russia during this terrible, terrible conflict. The problem in NATO is that when NATO was founded, the assumption among those who founded it was that Turkish secularism was democratic and Turkey would always be secular. Neither of those things were actually true. Post the end of the Cold War, there were new requirements for NATO membership that had to do with democracy and human rights.

Turkey would never meet those criteria now. And the only way a country leaves NATO is voluntarily. You can get out, you can check out of the hotel NATO, but you have to invoke, I believe it's Article 13, and then there's a year transition and then you can actually leave NATO. The Turks will never do that because being part of NATO is important to them and increasingly sort of insurance against, as I was saying, insurance against policies that run counter to American and Western interests.

DUBOWITZ: Okay guys, so I want to do a lightning round. I'm going to ask you to do something neither of you are usually good at, and you have 30 seconds to answer. So imagine you're on TV now with talking points. So I got about six or seven lightning round questions to wrap this up. Okay.

COOK: Never had a good bagel in Philly. Go. Next one. Pizza in New York is better than Philly.

DUBOWITZ: Cheesesteaks where? Philly, New York?



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COOK: I mean, come on. I'm not even going to go there.

DUBOWITZ: Not even going there. Okay, Jon, Iran or Turkey? Which poses the greatest long-term strategic challenge to Israel?

SCHANZER: Turkey does. They've got much more of a sophisticated military. If they decided to go to war against Israel, it would be brutal. Not to say that Iran doesn't have power and doesn't have the ability to hurt Israel or the United States or any other country in the region. But when you go pound for pound, military for military, this is a serious country with serious capabilities more so than the Iranians ever had.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. Steven, do you agree or disagree? If you agree, we'll move to the next question.

COOK: Agree. I mean, the Iran challenge isn't over, but Iran doesn't have an Air Force. Turkey has an Air Force.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So question for you, Steven. Will Turkey and Israel exchange fire in the next five years?

COOK: I think six months ago I would've said this is all rhetorical and unfortunate. I think that they're coming closer and closer to get to trading blows. I think that the Israeli bombing of the airstrip near Aleppo was a sign that the Israelis are increasingly concerned about a Turkish presence in Syria and that Israelis have vowed they will not allow a hostile external actor to build out capability in Syria. And the Turks seemed determined to do so. So I think we're headed towards something. The only way we avert it is that the United States gets hip to this.

DUBOWITZ: Okay, Jon, agree or disagree? If you agree, I'll move to the next question.

SCHANZER: Agree. The only thing I would just say is apparently, and this is just according to reports that I can't yet confirm, but there may have been actually some moments over the mid off the coast of Syria where the two Air Forces have already, they haven't exchanged fire, but they've put a lock on each other. In other words, threatening to fire, showing that both sides are capable of doing so. We're a lot closer, I think, than people think.

DUBOWITZ: So I'll ask both of you, Jon, first, does Erdogan actually want the Islamic Republic of Iran to survive, even though they have been historically geopolitical competitors?

SCHANZER: I think he'd like to see the Islamic Republic survive in a much weakened state. In other words, if this thing is limping along, but still an inspiration to jihadists around the world, as long as it doesn't pose a threat to Turkey's regional aspirations, they're allowed to live in Erdogan's view. He'll keep it solvent, but he doesn't want to have it be powerful. He wants to be more powerful than Iran.

COOK: Agree. Agree. I think a limping along Islamic Republic that is still a challenge keeps the Israelis busy, and that's in his interest.

DUBOWITZ: And Steven, do you think a post-Assad Syria is truly becoming a Turkish client state or you think that's being exaggerated?

COOK: Well, I think that that is the clear intention on the part of Turkey. Ahmed al-Sharaa is clearly their guy, and they very much want to make sure that Damascus is heavily influenced by Ankara. I think it's undoubtedly the case. There are other suitors. The Saudis have invested heavily in Syria, the countries as well, but the countries come along with the Turks.

DUBOWITZ: Jon, I assume you agree with that?



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SCHANZER: I do. I would just note, watch carefully for the Turkish military putting more and more. We're hearing this out of Israel right now. The Syrian military is the fastest growing military in the world, and that is because of platforms being brought into the country by the Turks primarily. Secondly, the Russians, which is also interesting. You talked before about this kind of weird thing going on between Russia and Turkey. They're partnering as they arm up the Syrian Al-Qaeda regime.

DUBOWITZ: So Jon, will Turkey ever pursue a nuclear weapon?

SCHANZER: That's an interesting question. Look, right now what we have is we've got, I mean, this is according to open-source reporting. We've got nukes at Incirlik, which is our major NATO air base. And that is the thing that sort of protects the Turks from a possible nuclear strike by Russia or what have you. I mean, it also could make them targets, but nevertheless, there is a sense that the NATO armaments that are there are a shield for them in some shape or form. I think I want to watch carefully what happens here between NATO and Turkey and the tensions that I think are. We are going to see more tension creep into this relationship. There could come a moment where there is fallout with the United States. That's the moment where I think you could begin to see the Turks steer things in the wrong direction.

COOK: Just one note, the Turkish nuclear facilities are being built in partnership with the Russians. In fact, the Russians essentially own the Turkish nuclear site that's being developed. As far as nuclear weapons go, I don't think that there's any publicly available evidence that the Turks are actively pursuing nukes, but they're also actively pursuing an advanced defense industrial base. And that may be the next step in decades down the road, but there's no evidence of it right now.

DUBOWITZ: Okay. So last question before I get to the final end of this is one word. Jon, Turkey, ally, rival, adversary, or enemy?

SCHANZER: Adversary at this point. I used to say frenemy. I would say adversary now.

DUBOWITZ: Steven?

COOK: Of the United States. I actually wrote that piece calling them a frenemy. So I'll stick with frenemy, which I don't think was one of your categories, but I like that one.

DUBOWITZ: All right. So here, just to wrap it up, so Jon Schanzer, what is your friend Steven Cook? What's the one thing that he gets wrong about Turkey?

SCHANZER: Well, I mean, number one, he's a Knicks fan, and I think we just need to understand that that's a serious problem. He's also a Yankees fan. That is probably—

COOK: A—

SCHANZER: Bigger problem. I watch that—

COOK: Tip in once a day.

SCHANZER: Okay.

COOK: OG. OG. I'm—



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SCHANZER: Sorry. Yeah. He's also a Giants fan, a Rangers fan. I mean, the list of problems that I could enumerate here for Steven I think is long. Look, I would argue that Steven and I, once upon a time, we came at things from different places, but I think we've kind of arrived at the same place, which is this is a dangerous regime, and I think it's only going to grow more dangerous as long as Erdogan stays in power and continues to pursue these policies. I don't know if, Steven, if you're still of the opinion that we can turn this ship around. I think that's where you and I have had differences in the past. I don't think that we can turn Turkey around at this point. I think that the way in which Erdogan has gutted the regime and has just Islamized society, I have a really hard time seeing Turkey being able to go back to what we all remember when we were backpacking around Turkey in the 1990s and early 2000s.

I guess I'm curious to hear whether you still think there's hope for this regime. I'm deeply, deeply concerned. I think it'll be a generational effort to reverse the damage that Erdogan's done.

COOK: First, let me just say that for the two and a half years that I lived in Philadelphia, I never told a soul that I was a New York Giants fan because I was afraid for my life if I did. Just any mild matter in Philadelphia. For good reason. I root for the Giants. Dubowitz can—

SCHANZER: Tell you about some stories we've experienced in Philadelphia sports—

COOK: Venues. This is not called the City of Brotherly Love because people are nice to each other. It's called the City of Brotherly Love because there's a lot of churches. In any event, on Turkey, I think Jonathan's right. I think we have moved closer than over the years. But I will point out on his last point, I have been telling my Turkish friends that the political scientist in me understands that institutional change is very, very hard. And Erdogan has had almost a quarter century now to hollow out, bend, discover new institutions that have fundamentally altered Turkey's political and social order. And so that when he dies and the AKP cracks and crumbles, we're not going to go back to 2000 or 2001, that these things have path dependencies and that Turkey's political trajectory has been set in many ways as a result of the last almost 25 years.

I think possibly where Jonathan and I differ is that it's not that I think that there's a way to turn Turkey around. I think that there's a way for the United States to force off-ramp an off-ramp here. And that is to get serious about Turkey's regional transgressions and rather than pursuing a policy that either previous Democratic presidents have pursued, which is you get what you get, and you don't get upset. So that is if the Turks are willing to negotiate some sort of grain deal that helps feed Egyptians, but it opens up economic ties with Russia, that's good for us because that's good enough. Or the Trump administration's coddling of Turkey. I think that a change in American foreign policy may get the Turks to stand down. That is my hope. And that the region doesn't come to blows, that Israel and Turkey don't come to blows going forward.

But right now, there's no indication that there's going to be a significant change in American policy.

DUBOWITZ: So I want to end with an anecdote because we've all spent a lot of time in Turkey. I remember it's about 2005. I'm sitting in Reina. Remember Reina? That beautiful nightclub on the Bosphorus. And I'm sitting with an old friend of mine from high school. It's about two in the morning we've been drinking. And at some point, he puts his arm around me and he says, "Dubowitz, my mission in life is to keep that hot woman out of a burka." And I said, "That's a good mission to have in life." And he was a single guy, so that was certainly his mission.



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Not a politically correct story, but I think an interesting one because 12 years later, I believe, 2017, that nightclub was the target of an Islamic state terrorist attack. 39 people were killed, if you guys remember. And it just suggests to me that Erdogan is playing with fire as he continues to push Islam, political Islam into that society, that no matter what he's doing, there's going to be Islamic Jihadists like the Islamic State who are going to continue to hit Turkey. And Turkey was obviously the target of numerous terrorist attacks by jihadi terrorist organizations. By the way, a number also foiled as a result of the help that they got from Israeli intelligence. So I guess just to end, I mean, Steven Jon is ultimately Erdogan playing with fire and that the real danger for what's happening in Turkey is that he's going to push this society so far that either Turks are going to be like Iranians and they're going to push back against Islam and they're going to secularize the way that Iranians have by having religion shoved down their throats.

Or is the other risk equally acute? And that is that for Erdogan, he pushes the society so far on the political Islam spectrum that he's going to have more and more Islamist terrorist attacks in the heart of Turkey.

COOK: I'll go first here. Look, I think it's unresolved, to be honest with you. I think you have a cohort of young people who have no nothing but Erdogan and Chafe under AKP's rule and want nothing more than for Erdogan and the AKP to fail. Yet they have this vice grip on government helped by a pretty lame opposition, which they've now destroyed. And then Erdogan has a kind of Islamist old guard to his right, which have applied pressure on him. If you remember back in the early days after October 7th, Turkey maintained its rather robust trade relations with Israel. And it was this Islamist old guard that pushed Erdogan to sever those ties. And there's still accusations that they haven't completely severed those ties because Turkey's business likes trading with the Israelis. They're just doing it by way of Azerbaijan and the Palestinian authority now. But still, so I think there are things that are buffeting Turkey in question of its identity.

I would say that those leaders in the region who have sought to ride the Islamist tiger have often gotten bit. And so there are, I think, risks all around. But Erdogan's a very good politician and a very paranoid politician, which is a good trait in politicians. And has, as Jonathan pointed out, and I emphasize, has for all of his positioning himself as a kind of leader of a changed Middle East during the heady days of the Arab uprisings, has basically used the same authoritarian tools to establish political control in Turkey. So Turkey's been a target of terrorism. It likely will be soon. The question is how is society reacting to the deepening of authoritarianism in Turkey? And I don't think we know.

DUBOWITZ: And Jon, post-Erdogan, are we getting the equivalent of a Turkish Mojtaba Khamenei, or are we going to get a return to a modern adathurk? What's your prediction?

SCHANZER: Yeah, I mean, if you look at what Erdogan's done, he's crushed the opposition. He actually took the mayor of Istanbul who is running against him in the forthcoming elections. He's the most popular—

COOK: Politician in Turkey.

SCHANZER: Just put the guy in jail for the crime of running against Erdogan. And so what you have is gutting of the secular opposition. If you look at Erdogan's son, Bilal Erdogan, look, I don't want to make comparisons, but I think he might be as psychotic as Mojtaba Khamenei, just in a different way. I think he probably has all of his limbs intact, which I'm not sure we can say about Mojtaba—

COOK: Right now. I think began, but never finished a PhD at SAIS, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International—

DUBOWITZ: Studies. Wow, that's my alma mater, so I'm embarrassed.



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SCHANZER: Wow. But yeah, I am concerned about what comes after. By the way, the other guy that I would just keep an eye on is Hakan Fidan. This is the guy that was the head of the MIT, and he's now the foreign minister of Turkey, and he was the one who was responsible for bringing Hamas in and supporting the Islamic state and money laundering for the Islamic Republic. I mean, he was the man who knows where all the bodies are buried and he's been the guy that's been doing the wet work. And he is coming up in the rear view right now in ways that I would watch. So yeah, I mean, look, bottom line is Turkey, it is a NATO ally. It is a country that we have good relations with. It's got a normal-ish economy. It's got all the trappings of a normal state, but it is trending in the direction that looks more and more like an Islamic republic along the lines of what we've been watching out of Iran.

It is something that it's not a foregone conclusion, but I think without recognition, without an understanding of the trajectory that we're on, we could be in real trouble. And this is, again, I think the moment where Donald Trump needs to step up, Tom Barick needs to step aside. We need to get some serious people in that room to try to nudge Turkey back in the right direction.

DUBOWITZ: Well, gentlemen, we're going to end it there. I think the only good news I take from this entire conversation is personal, and that is that as potentially the Islamic Republic of Iran ends up on the sheep of history, I can retire. You gentlemen can take over and go after the Islamic Republic of Turkey. You can co-host the Turkey Breakdown, a new podcast coming out from FDD and CFR anytime soon. And I'll be on some beach in Greece with our Greek friends and our Cypriot friends watching you wage war against this new dangerous regime. Thank you for both of you for your great love. I'm a loner—

COOK: Not a fighter.

DUBOWITZ: We won't even end on that because the stories I've heard believe that. But thank you both guys. Great analysis, great humor, and we'll have you back soon.

COOK: Thanks, Mark. Thanks, Mark. Good to see you, Jon.