

March 8, 2024

Featuring Gallia Lindenstrauss, Michael Rubin, and Tugce Varol

Moderated by Sinan Ciddi

Introductory remarks by Jonathan Schanzer

SCHANZER: Welcome and thank you for joining this virtual discussion hosted by Foundation For Defense Of Democracies. It's Friday, March 8th. I'm Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president for research here at FDD.

Our panel today will discuss Turkey and its role in facilitating illicit finance and its support of terrorism.

Turkey's been in and out of the headlines for the last five months because of its support for the terrorist group, Hamas, which of course, perpetrated those attacks on Israel on October 7th. Since then, I think the world has learned quite a bit about Turkey's support for this Palestinian terrorist organization. It has a major headquarters in Istanbul. The president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meets often with some of the top officials of Hamas, including some of the military figures that were involved in the attacks of 10/7, as well as other attacks during previous wars.

But Hamas is just a small piece of this, right? We know that the regime in Turkey has been involved in facilitating the activities of the Islamic State. Back when that was a major problem in the Middle East, the Turks were allowing ISIS fighters to fly into the airport in Istanbul. The fighters then made their way east to enter into Iraq and Syria. We know about illicit oil schemes. We learned about illicit antiquities schemes, all designed to raise money for the Islamic State while the Turkish regime turned a blind eye.

Today, we see Islamist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda still operating in Syria with facilitation by the regime in Ankara. Unbelievable that it is still happening to this day.

Then, if we can take another step back and take a look at something that made massive headlines years ago but is still being watched today. I'm speaking here about the so-called Gas for Gold Scheme. This was a \$20 billion illicit financial scheme facilitated by the Turks and the Iranians, all designed to help bring money to the theocracy in Iran at the height of our sanctions designed to prohibit Iran's nuclear program.

Today, there are questions swirling about whether Turkey is facilitating additional illicit financial schemes for the regime in Moscow, for Vladimir Putin, but also for Venezuela. Lots of questions still out there about what's going on with this Turkish regime, which of course, is still a member of NATO.

We'll talk about all of that and more today with our panel, and so I'm pleased now to introduce that panel for today's discussion.

First, we've got Gallia Lindenstrauss, who is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies and editor of the institute's journal, "*Strategic Assessment*". Gallia specializes in Turkish foreign policy. Her additional research interests are ethnic conflicts, Azerbaijan's foreign policy, the Cyprus issue and the Kurds. She has written extensively on these topics and her commentaries and op-eds have appeared in numerous publications globally.

Then we've got Michael Rubin, who's a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He specializes there in Iran, Turkey and the broader Middle East. Formerly he worked as a Pentagon official, taught classes at sea to deployed U.S. Navy and Marine units, and he's authored several books. By the way, he's joining me as a guest on the FDD Morning Brief, as well.

Then we've got Tugce Varol, who is an adjunct professor at San Diego City College. She has received degrees in international relations from Yeditepe University and Kadir Has University, and conducted postdoctoral research in Moscow State University, faculty of global studies. She has worked as an assistant professor in Turkey until 2015 before moving to California, where she received a second master's degree from San Diego State University in 2020.

Moderating today's conversation is my colleague, Sinan Ciddi, a non-resident senior fellow at FDD and an expert on Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy. Sinan was the executive director of the Institute of Turkish Studies based at Georgetown University, and he continues to serve as an adjunct associate professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He was born in Turkey and educated in the United Kingdom.

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Before we dive into our featured discussion, just a few words here about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely-independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit our website, FDD.org, and follow us on Twitter @FDD.

That's it for me now. Sinan, over to you.

CIDDI: Well, good morning, and welcome to our first virtual event on the Turkey Program at FDD during 2024. We're thrilled, as Jon said, to welcome a good, a fantastic panel of colleagues, and we're delighted to have them.

And so, thank you all for making time for this. I think we have a lot of issues to discuss, and I think I would agree with Jon, and you probably would too, that any one of the number of issues that he mentioned, we could probably spend an eternity, or at least a good part of a day sort of elaborating and expanding upon if we had the time, which we don't.

So, we're here for approximately the next 55 minutes of discussion, and in addition to the conversation that we are having and that will be posted on our website after this, should you be interested in further work you can do one of two things. On the landing page for this event, we have actually highlighted some research work published by various outlets that FDD has put on its website. I think I may be the primary author of some of those. But that's one point of interest if you should be — you know, if you have further curiosity on these — some of these issues that we touch upon. But also, I would encourage you to follow the social media and publication record of all of our panelists today who obviously continue to do extensive work on some of the issues that we're going to talk about.

But without further ado, I'm just going to launch straight into it. And I — if I may, I'll start with you, Gallia. It is obvious that Turkey has played, I will call a hypocritical role in the Gaza War since October 7th.

On the one hand, what we see is Turkey prior to this trying to normalize ties with Israel but at the — before the beginning of the war it — this sort of posture became quickly overshadowed by Erdogan's full-fledged support of Hamas.

While Ankara condemns the military campaign against Hamas by Israel, it continues to engage in trade, especially firms who are owned by AKP [The Justice and Development Party] elites, not least of all one of Erdogan's sons, but also and persons like former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim. What are we to make of Turkey's stance on this issue?

LINDENSTRAUSS: Thank you for being here. I'm really happy to join the discussion.

It's true that Turkey is a significant trade partner for Israel. Some years, it was the — on — among — Israel was among the top 10 export partners of Turkey. Now, it's only in the top — in the 16th markets for Turkey's exports. It should be emphasized, however, that mutual trade volume has gone down between the states already before the October 7th war, and we have witnessed actually a 30 percent decline in 2023, compared to 2022.

But it's, however, more an issue of reduced demand in Israel because of the slowing down of Israel economy, and especially the slowing down of the building sector in Israel, then an intentional policy on behalf of Ankara to reduce trade.

The continuing trade between Israel and Turkey, as you mentioned, is used to criticize President Erdogan both from within the country and from the outside. People say he has not matched his very harsh rhetoric against Israel with actions, and since he's not cut trade relations with Israel.

But actually, from my perspective, we should criticize Erdogan. He focuses on different routes. First of all, Turkey knows well from its own history and current challenges the difficulties and dilemmas of combating a terror organization such as Hamas, and I see zero reflection of that in public statements coming out of Ankara.

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And second, there is — if Turkey's really worried about the wellbeing of Palestinian people. I would say Hamas completely irresponsible, and if I can add also, suicidal in the way it acts on October 7th, proves that it's not an actor that can be relied upon for promoting the wellbeing of the Palestinians.

And again, I don't see any re-thinking of its status in Ankara. Ankara still says it's not a terror organization, and I think there's no new reflection on behalf of Ankara.

And I'll stop here with this remark.

CIDDI: Well, let me follow up there because you've opened some interesting doors there. Do you — so do we think at this point that this sort of, what I would call, a charade of trying to normalize ties with Israel prior to October 7 via subsequent sort of actions, calling Israel a terrorist state and referring to Prime Minister Netanyahu as a 'Nazi', quote, is just basically that Ankara has given up on all of this and it's prioritized vilifying Israel ahead of pursuing any meaningful dialogue to essentially rebuild substantive ties with a strong US ally and basically the only robust democracy in the Middle East?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So still, it — in this kind of crisis, we see mostly harsh rhetoric. We still haven't seen actions on behalf of Ankara and — since that diplomatic relations have not been downgraded. And actually, the first country to call its ambassador for consultations has been Israel. Israel withdrew its ambassador from Turkey before Turkey withdrew its ambassador from Israel.

I think Turkey wants to be very much involved in the day after the war in Gaza, and — but it's a plan — currently, it's sidelined, basically it doesn't have — it's not used for mediation as Egypt and Qatar is. Obviously, other actors have much more impact on the way things are going. And the — Turkey is only currently acting mostly as a spoiler, I would say.

CIDDI: Well, one final question on that sense, and then I'll go to Michael. So the — one of the theme and topic of this panel is essentially looking at illicit finance on — you know, at a heavy scale.

And I think it would be fair to say that a lot of ongoing research, not just at FDD but across Washington organizations, as well as over in Europe, seems to suggest that Turkey seems to or plays a front row sort of seat in providing — or at least channeling funds to Hamas in Gaza in quite sophisticated ways.

From your — I mean, you're in Israel, so you — and you follow this stuff quite — you know, quite closely — what would you say is the role that Ankara plays in facilitating, you know, monetary transfers to Hamas from domestic and international sources?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So again, from the perspective we got after October 7th, Sinan, and understanding that all on Hamas was preparing for a big offensive, clearly ammunitions, money, and building supplies for tunnels that were delivered to Hamas through Turkey are a big part of the story. Just since September, there was a news report on explosive materials to produce rockets in bags containing plaster that were confiscated from the Israeli port authorities that were coming for [sic, from] Turkey.

And again, when you understand now that Hamas was preparing its stocks of rockets to enable this infiltration of the fence between Gaza and Israel in 30 locations and to commit all this atrocities it did under this rocket fire on Israel, then of course Hamas's activity on Turkish soil gets even more sinister meaning than we thought before.

And even if I take face value the stories that — of supposedly people working for the Mossad being arrested in Turkey and add up the numbers, one can understand that a lot of illicit Hamas activity is taking place in Turkey. Same is true for stories of arrests of people in Israel that were operating for Hamas. And all these stories, when you look at them, usually have a Turkish angle. Either the person was a student in Turkey or repeatedly visited the country and met Hamas operatives there.

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So to sum, I would say that as part of Israel's mistakes of letting Hamas grow to the level it grew in Gaza, accepting as a fact that Turkey allows such illicit activities to happen on its soil was also a mistake, and Israel should be much more adamant in the future that its relations with Turkey will progress only if Turkey will seriously cut down on its relations with Hamas.

CIDDI: Yeah, thanks, Gallia. I mean, that prove the point we could, again, spend forever talking about because since October 7, what we've seen on the U.S. side is, you know, sanctions against persons and entities in Turkey that are directly, materially supporting Hamas activities, either financially or from a recruitment perspective.

You know, we've seen an uptick in sanctions behavior, mainly, you know, that we have consistently warned about at FDD for a number of years now. But I think October 7 has — seems to have been a sort of — a watershed moment. But more on that later.

Michael, just picking off where essentially you — Gallia left off, I mean, it — you also write extensively on this, you speak on this extensively, but what do you make of, you know, what Ankara wants to sort of — what does the world want Ankara, you know, to — you know, what role does Ankara want the world to believe it's playing in relation to the Gaza War? Because it seems to have a particular message that it wants to convey as to what Turkey is trying to achieve.

On the one hand, it says it wants to play a mediating role, right, for a two-state solution. On the other hand, what we see in — through FDD research, which has been quite revelatory, I would say, is basically Turkey has gone and sort of outlined quite ably is a sort of base for channeling monies from worldwide Hamas supporters to the actual main organization in Gaza.

Is the Turkish government unaware of this or can we say it's actually participating and enabling in it, all these sort of actions?

RUBIN: Well, first, Sinan, let me just give my commendation to FDD for consistently being ahead of the curve on this issue.

In answer to your question, unfortunately, I say we, the world, and certainly we in the United States are naive. The White House likes to say the adults are back in charge but too often we're like babes in the wood, too willing to believe what we are told, too little sense and appreciation of the history at play.

Allowing Turkey to have any role in Gaza is akin to making Germany peacekeepers in Sudetenland or allowing Italy to take the lead role internationally in Libya. Unfortunately, that's what the international community did there.

We tend to be ignorant of the ulterior motives of Turkey — their religious, their ideological, their historical, their psychological. I mean, we have the same pattern as Iran, where we constantly give Turkey a blank slate and engage in wishful thinking.

The last thing I would say just on that issue is we don't pay attention to what Turkey is saying outside of English. So for example, we just saw the Taliban unleash Turkish propaganda with a backdrop that was constructed inside Turkey of Jerusalem. And the same thing happens in Somalia. So I would say that we've simply got to see the big picture and stop being led around by the nose by Turkish diplomats. We've got to calibrate our policy to what reality is, rather than what wishful thinking would suggest.

CIDDI: No doubt. Thank you for that injection, Michael. But if we have to drill down a bit, there seems to be this sort of bifurcation of lines of effort by the U.S. government, right, so in holding Turkey to account over some of these transgressions, right, or some of these what we would call illegal behavior.

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On the one hand, we've got, as I just mentioned previously, you know, the Treasury Department increasing its sanctions behavior for some pretty interesting people anywhere that's — you know, recently sanctioned Hamas liaison between the Turkish government and Hamas proper in Gaza, Jihad Yaghmour, to, you know, major construction firms, which seem to be funneling moneys from around the world to Gaza proper, such as Trend GYO, a major Turkish construction company, which was recently sanctioned.

But on the other hand, what we see is the State Department, our colleagues at the State Department here, you know, following this sort of Swedish accession to NATO, we saw quite sort of, I would say, rosy behavior, trying to sort of latch onto this sort of, let's see if we can bring Turkey back into the Western fold by making promises such as, you know, if Turkey continues down the right way, we could possibly put it back into the F-35 program. So there seems to be some sort of discord in terms of government action towards what we want to do with Turkey. What would you say about that?

RUBIN: Well, I would say that you actually put your finger right on the problem. And what we're seeing is the corruption, if you will, of diplomacy and the triumph of wishful thinking over reality. As your staff, I mean, people like Jonathan Schanzer, who worked in Treasury in the wake of 9/11 understand, is that President Bush issued an executive order empowering the Treasury Department to designate terrorists.

And every now and then, what I'll do is I'll look at the State Department's terrorism list and I'll compare it to the Treasury Department's terrorism list, which is about 30 times as long. And the biggest difference between the two is that the Treasury Department is objective rather than subjective when they actually designate terrorists. There's a lesson there, but I would build on what Gallia said, and I agree with what she said. It was excellent.

We've got to understand as the U.S. Government and the broader international community has to understand, terrorism isn't just the military action. That's the tip of the iceberg. There's also the financial, the logistical, the safe haven. Unfortunately, Turkey checks all the boxes.

I hate to be the one, but I think you're muted.

CIDDI: I haven't actually encountered that since the COVID times, but thank you, Michael. Yes. So, shifting slightly north of Turkey's borders just to keep on this theme of illicit finance, but also possibly support of terrorism, if you — depending on how you classify Russian action in Ukraine, right? But we'll definitely come back to them at least in just a few minutes.

But I wanted to move on to Tugce here who consistently — I followed her for several years now. Her work on Turkish-Russian relations, particularly in relation to Turkish-Russian energy ties, what some have called the sort of asymmetric sort of dependence of Turkey upon Russia is quite fascinating if you're interested in this. But I would say, you know, one of the areas to achieve that Turkey is trying to sort of project itself as a sort of constructive member of NATO is in relation to its role in the Ukraine war.

But what we do know is Turkey's ties with Vladimir Putin's Russia are extensive, right? They have really forged the working relationship despite widely differing world views. They've been able to compartmentalize quite effectively, particularly since after 2016. This relationship is not just limited to energy ties, but there's a realm of illicit financing that is allowed Russians to access the Turkish financial system since the beginning of the Ukraine war with the intention of Russian leads circumventing international sanctions, right?

So, such transactions arguably undermine the West's effort to defeat Putin as he continues to prosecute his illegal war in Ukraine. So based on what you've seen and what you followed, Tugce, how extensive is this sort of permissiveness to circumvent Russian, you know, sanctions on Russia? And why does everyone permit such access to illicit moneys to enter the world's financial system?

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VAROL: Thank you so much, Sinan, for inviting me to this panel. As you are all aware, Turkey adopted a balanced approach towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict that began in February, 2022. What does it mean? For example, Turkey has supplied drones to Ukraine while condemning Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory.

However, the Erdogan government has encouraged both public and private financial institutions to accept illicit Russian money from the beginning. Not to mention since October 2021, Turkey has been on the gray list of Financial Action Task Force. So the number of companies with Russian partnership increased from 100 to 1,300 between February, 2022 to February, 2023.

And in the same period, Russian citizens purchased more than 16,000 houses in Turkey. So this is just what's happening in Turkey. There is also another part of the story. Now, we observe money being transferred by Russian citizens, not only to Turkey, but also to Northern Cyprus. So North Cyprus is becoming a concern — growing a concern right now, following the shutdown of over 100,000 suspicious accounts, shell companies by the Cypriot government. Russian citizens have started purchasing properties on North Cyprus right now. And they're just using trust. So all these trusts are anonymous.

And briefly, Turkey is not joining vast in sanctions against Russia, but providing a safe hub for Russian money operations. So following the President Biden's December 2023 executive order, the dynamics are shifting toward Russian accounts in the Turkish financial system. But it's a recent development. So the U.S. Treasury now has the power to sanction non-U.S. companies that aid Russia's defense industry. So just this week, according to Russian news sources, at least two Turkish banks have started closing Russian bank accounts and some companies' accounts following U.S. threat of blacklisting them.

Your question, why Erdogan is permitting these illegal money transfers? So if you ask me, there are two reasons. First is money. Turkey's economy has been weakened, if not collapsed, right? At the same time, Erdogan became a dictator. But even though his country lacked natural resources to sell, it's not an oil or natural gas country. And second, he needs a political support.

Yes, technically, Turkey is in the Western alliance. But over, perhaps, the last 10 years, what we see Turkey's democracy has declined sharply and Ankara's commitment to Western partners has weakened. So it appears that Erdogan is more easily receiving political support from Putin than from his Western counterparts.

CIDDI: But yes — so I'm playing — yes, I'm throwing you what I would call a softball, Tugce, but isn't Turkey a NATO ally? I mean, you know, don't we have expectations of, you know, significant sort of NATO countries of what the bare minimum we should do? But you know, more substantively I would say to what extent do you agree that Putin probably has Erdogan over a barrel, right?

I mean that Turkey under Erdogan has really become just disproportionately dependent upon Russian goodwill. I'm talking about things like dependence on the Russian nuclear facility that's being built, the absolute vital lifeline that lock — you know, Russia's economy throws at Turkish farmers due to produce exports, the Russian tourism, not to mention the natural gas that Turkey is dependent upon which Putin essentially you know, sort of snarled that after Turkey you know, downed the Russian jet in 2015, right and showed what he was capable of in terms of holding Turkey to account and basically backed down from opposing Russia.

Do you think that Erdogan just simply has no choice but to capitulate and continue working with Putin? Or is there as you say you know, just this dependency on you know, money's coming into the Turkish financial system due to Turkey's very weakened economy?

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VAROL: Yes, last time I checked Turkey is a NATO member. Here's my point here. It was before 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Crimean part, when I was in Russia doing my post-doctorate researches I started calling the energy relationship between Turkey and Russia, no offense but Ukrainization of Turkey because Russia is infiltrating Turkey's energy market strongly not only exporting but building nuclear power plant in the southern shore or Mediterranean coast of Turkey, right?

And officially right now we know they declared that their interest at building the second one, this time in the Black Sea coast of Turkey. That's not the end of the story. They want to build a natural gas storage in the Thracian part of Turkey.

All these are part of Russian strategy to infiltrate into Turkey's energy market, OK? Strongly. This is what they did before the Ukrainian revolution you know, controlling all these critical areas. And it is available when you have particularly a corrupted leader like Erdogan in the system, right? So this is what I observe at the moment.

CIDDI: So you know, the shorter part of this question that I have — final question on this for you Tugce, would be to ask you, you know, if you have any sort of headline numbers that you want our viewers to take away in terms of some of this you know, illicit finance that goes through Turkey, part of — some of the stuff that we've written about at FDD seems to suggest not only the shipment of dual-use goods to Russia such as microelectronics that have been seized and identified.

We've seen for example crypto finance movements. I've even heard of things like illicit coal trade, right between Russian bootleggers that have essentially you know, crossed the Black Sea and which are basically illegal coal. Bootlegged coal is distributed through Turkey mainly from the sources of AKP elites that I've heard. But you can answer to that.

But the bigger question I have is you know, given that Turkey seems to be playing such a sort of lackluster or duplicitous role at least in the Ukraine conflict as a NATO member, why is the NATO alliance not holding Turkey to stronger account on this issue?

VAROL: Your first question, first of all I didn't hear the coal trade between Russia and Turkey but I can tell you that I know that a lot of Russian tankers changing their names and changing their codes just passing through the Turkish Straits every day, OK? There are some journalists specifically expert in this issue.

So second question, yes, NATO countries are struggling to hold Turkey into account. Why? Assuming that Turkey is part of the Western alliance. OK? It's not the only country in the West that violates sanctions against Russia. Unfortunately, there are other countries. So this is a card in Turkey's hand.

And the second reason is Turkey's current unpredictability in foreign policy. Just one example. Yes, we are talking about Russian increasing influence in Turkish energy market and foreign policy for so but today Zelenskyy visited Istanbul and met with Erdogan. And according to Zelenskyy's office you know, what the Ukrainian leader also visited shipyards where these Turkish shipyards are you know, building some corvettes for Ukrainian Navy.

So I'm not saying this — it's a wonderful policy. OK. Don't take it wrong please. I'm just trying to display the unpredictability because you know, what? Next week I cannot guarantee that Turkey will not order second S-400 missiles. Maybe it can happen too. This is what we are talking about. This is the unpredictability.

So given all these circumstances I do not anticipate any severe backlash from the West or NATO towards Erdogan because he actually settled himself, a very good place in this negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. That's why he organized — I mean Erdogan organized this meeting with Zelenskyy.

And you know, what? Just after the Russian elections, Putin will visit Turkey in mid-March. And then let's see what will happen that day.

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CIDDI: Thank you. That's — yes, I mean just the unpredictability is something that we've become accustomed to which some say and I would agree with this view that essentially it's a reflection of Turkey's sort of hyper presidential system which basically allows you know, President Erdogan to essentially wake up and call the shots as he sees fit without much sort of resistance at all.

But you know, Gallia, if I could just turn to you because there's a sort of cross-pollination of an idea there which is you know, that I'm sure you're accustomed to.

You know, Tugce just mentioned you know, ships changing sort of transponders and names you know, that are destined to Russia to avoid sort of you know, Western monitoring of goods and materials going to Russia, such as going to Russia for goods that you use for weapons manufacturing.

Isn't Turkey also doing that in terms of ships that that leave Turkish ports, change transponders such that they're not seem to be essentially docking in Israel, and offloading goods. What's your sense of that?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So first of all I think just going back to the comparison with Ukraine, I think it's interesting that Turkey managed to a very a quite balanced approach to Ukraine. And that gave it power also in the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. And had it presented a little bit more balanced approach to the Israel, Hamas conflict, I think that would have also helped it have a more helpful role in again possible post-war in Gaza scenarios.

So, I think in this respect Turkey made a mistake. It could have said yes, I resent a lot of Israel's policy regarding the Palestinians but I denounce what Hamas did on October 7th. So just — that's just the point of comparison.

With regard to the issue of energy, of course there's — Israel gets quite a substantial amount of its oil from Azerbaijan, from the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline from there in tankers to Israel. And this has continued. This is another thing that Erdogan is criticized about but I think it gives this Azerbaijan angle actually moderates a little Erdogan's response to Israel. And I think this has been quite helpful the fact that Azerbaijan is pressuring Turkey to lower its ire against Israel.

CIDDI: Michael, what do you think? Gallia raised the point in her opening sort of comments which I've made note of and I couldn't help but you know — you've written extensively about this which is not sort of in the panel description but I think it helps underline a point, which is this notion of Turkey sort of you know, quote-unquote you know, terrorism question itself, the one that it wants the world to essentially realize which is you know, its fight with the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] since the 1980s.

And Gallia made the point that essentially, how can Turkey countenance what Hamas is doing when it knows full well what the PKK has, sort of, visited upon Turkey since the 1980s?

And with a particular view to you know, what we see now with the PYD — [Democratic Union Party] YPG [People's Defense Units], it's kind of topical because you and I previously spoke just before the panel started, whereby you know, Turkish foreign minister is in Washington trying to get the administration to end support for the Syrian-Kurdish PYD YPG forces which it wants you know, which it labels as a terrorist organization because of its links to the PKK.

I've called this and I think you backed me up on this, is just a manufactured threat for Erdogan, right, that allows him to essentially you know, do the strong man front at home to attract voters and essentially the PYD, whilst it's historically related to the PKK, is not actually a security threat to Turkey. Well — what's your — so what do you say about the lack of empathy towards Israel's sort of terrorism concern whilst Turkey sort of turns a blind eye and bombs a critical U.S. partner in the region?

RUBIN: Well in many ways, Sinan, I mean the question is asked and answered and you've highlighted the hypocrisy there.

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Look, you know, some of my personal background here, I was held at gunpoint by the PKK in northern Iraq back around 2000/2001. I've since traveled extensively across the autonomous administration of North and East Syria, and I see the evolution there.

But if we want to look at the big picture, one of the biggest problems we have in international relations is that there is no standard definition of terrorism. It's like that old Supreme Court case in the United States where — about pornography, in which the Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart said, "well I can't define it, but I know it when I see it." That's the same attitude the international community takes with regard to terrorism.

According to Columbia University they had chronicled a hundred different definitions of terrorism just among the United Nations and Western security agencies in the year 1988. By 2006, that was up to 250 different definitions. So the end result is an a la carte approach where we're always against terrorism unless it happens to be for a cause with which I agree.

If I had to be policy prescriptive what I would say is that the United States and Israel should not give anyone any counterterrorism assistance unless they first sign on to a standard definition of terrorism which we put forward.

If we can get 70 or 80 countries signed on, that gives us a bloc where we can affect policy, so we keep avoiding, in order to avoid this, what do you call it? This loophole that Turkey engages in, which you highlight. I mean, Turkey at this point, is sponsoring terrorism while lecturing the world that it is trying to defend itself. The only country that's gotten away with it like Turkey has been Pakistan.

CIDDI: Right. I mean, you know, I'm kind of impressed and saddened at the same time because Erdogan seems to have come out quite on top of this, right, in basically getting the U.S. government, across administrations, to cower away from essentially standing behind the Syrian Kurds who have done untold sort of sacrifices to eliminate and degrade ISIS in the last decade or more, right?

And then really paid the highest cost, I would argue, in the region. And what we see, on the other hand, is basically the Turkish government still materially supporting, actually has forces on the ground in Syria that actively supports remnants of al-Qaeda as well as other jihadist elements. That's quite inexplicable to me. But what I would cite as the actual success of Erdogan is him hammering down on this notion of PKK, YPG.

They're all the same he says. They're terrorists and they should be dealt with accordingly. And what we see is the United States government never really owning its relationship, its ties with an entity, which are the Syrian Kurds. We'll call them the Syrian democratic forces, or whatever you want to call them. Right? Who have not once made one overt or covert threat to Turkey, have never carried out an act of violence against Turkey. They have no aspirations towards Turkish territory, right? And basically, he holds the U.S. government and the West hostage over this, right?

Why doesn't the US essentially own their partners and say, you know, back off. This is an issue. Get with the program. They're not with terrorists. And you could actually resolve this issue if you wanted, just like you resolved your situation and relationship with the KRG, with the Iraqi Kurds. What's holding you back?

RUBIN: Well, Sinan, I absolutely agree with you, and I'll be very brief because I don't want to take the floor from Tugce or Gallia, but, first of all, we should throw the same logic back, and we tend not to deal with our partners the same way, saying, look, if you don't think that the Kurds have evolved with regards to their political ideology, can you say the same thing about the Ikhwan, about the Muslim Brotherhood. Has that not evolved? Are you not, therefore, a terrorist or the same thing with Milli Görüş?

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But what drives me nuts is something different, which is too often in the United States, whether it's with regard to terror finance, whether it's with regard to Turkey's soft underbelly of support for terrorism, we want to say, OK, at this point, we all recognize that Erdogan is bad.

I mean, even his former defenders will say that. But they say we can't do too much damage to the relationship because we have to worry about what comes in after Erdogan. But here's the problem. More than 30 million Turkish schoolchildren have been educated under Erdoganism. He's completely reshaped the Turkish military.

And at the same time, even if we get someone who is democratic, someone who's liberal, even if I win the lottery tomorrow, Erdogan has shown the power of this populism. So, even if we get a liberal interregnum of a year or two, I suspect we're looking at a situation where we're going to see future Erdogans. And I'm afraid, quite honestly, that one may be visiting Washington, DC, as we speak.

CIDDI: Right. I mean, there's so much to take away from there. I would say, you know, Foreign Minister Fidan has been identified as the person who essentially allowed organizational space and diplomatic cover to establish Hamas inside of Turkey. Right?

He's the main architect of that. I would also say for all the sort of grudgings that we have, or the Turkish government has towards the United States, which I call the manufacturer threat for its support of the PYD, we never remind the Turkish government that it was the United States in concert with Israel, I might add, with both intelligence services that handed Abdullah Öcalan to Turkish authorities back in the late '90s.

And this should just be shouted from the rooftops. The amount of satellite imagery and drone imagery that we gave to Turkey as part of the DOD programs up until recently that provided sort of essential cover over Turkey's airspace over its Iraqi border, not all of this has been forgotten by the Turks. And they just want to hammer on down this sort of manufactured thread, as I call it.

RUBIN: Or Sinan, that the only reason we turned to the PYD around the time of the siege of Kobani, they were our plan B. The reason they were our plan B was because our plan A working with Turkey didn't work. Because Turkey seemed to be, with a nod and a wink, supporting the wrong side.

VAROL: Can I add some points?

CIDDI: Absolutely, Tugce, go ahead. I was going to ask you, but go ahead first, and I have a question for you afterwards.

VAROL: I mean, I agree with most of the points. Since we are talking about the uncertainty of U.S. politics towards the northern Syria, maybe we need to highlight some questions. What I'm assuming is Turkish part is asking constantly United States, what is your plan in Syria? Because Turkey is saying, officially, this is our red line. We are not allowing you to create a Kurdish state here. At least we know the statement, but from United States, we don't know clearly what is the plan.

But let me remind you one thing. What is happening between PKK and YPG, right now, PKK is having some problems in northern Iraq, clashing with the Barzani government, right? And I just want to highlight one more point. What I see is, I see that the elimination of PKK, transitioning YPG in a legal format, if not state, but still a legalized administration. But United States seems like giving itself a space and time.

As you mentioned, Michael, very well the definition of terrorism is more than 100. Every year there are new definitions, and at the same time labeling terrorist organizations are changing, too. It's a dynamic matter. Let's say 10 years ago, you were labeling terrorists A group A, OK, but this year, maybe they are liberalization organization. So, what I see is every actor in the region should be careful.

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Five years later, 10 years later, we don't know what will be United States policy. I don't want to see another growing of terrorist organization for United States. I hope I'm clear because it's a gray area right now. Not a terrorist organization, not a state. But what are you trying to do? What is your goal in Syria? That's my point.

CIDDI: That's a crucial point, I think, and I appreciate that Tugce simply because I would agree with you that which spans across administration, certainly since the death blow that was dealt on the ISIS forces in the late 2010s, since then, I would agree with you that we've been very muddled in this country as to what our policy towards Syria and what the future of that looks like.

I think the only thing that we have going on is to maintain our sort of lukewarm and somewhat embarrassed position towards supporting the Syrian Kurdish forces, because we want them to man the ISIS prisons. We want them to continue pursuing any remnants of ISIS fighters so that they don't resurge.

But let me ask you, this was what I was going to ask you, you know, based on Michael's comments and the discussion just we had with him before this, which would lead into sort of the Russia perspective, too, because it seems to me that both things are linked in one sense.

Do you think that Western reluctance to sort of highlight and show up Turkey's sort of unhelpful behavior towards the Ukraine-Russia war, unhelpful behavior towards what's going on in Israel in this war with Hamas, is based on this notion of a pathological fear of 'losing Turkey,' quote, unquote. They just don't want to cross that threshold because we don't know what the scenario is going to look like five years from now.

VAROL: So, you're talking about the worst-case scenario. Everybody is thinking about this, OK? There are some points that you are right. In NATO partnership, there's always a worst-case scenario if one day we lose Turkey from the alliance. I want to tell you something. Right now, yes, Russia is invading Ukraine, attacking Ukraine.

And we are talking about, if Ukraine is defeated, then what will happen? And there are reasonable concerns in Europe, Baltic countries. I totally understand them. However, my projection is, after defeating Ukraine, Russia's next target will be Turkey. Turkey will be completely vulnerable against victorious Russia because Russian companies already in Turkey, already operating Russian diaspora right now in Turkey, and they are creating their own economy, so to speak.

And that's the worst-case scenario. So, I think there is risk for this. Maybe it's a low percentage. But given that the corrupted Turkish politics, I mean, it's not a declining democracy anymore. It's not a democracy, let's be honest. So, under these circumstances, it's going to take Erdogan's just one minute decision to increase its partnership with Russia.

Here is another scenario for you. If Russia completes the construction of nuclear Akkuyu power plant in Mersin and then completes the construction of natural gas storage in the Thracia area just next to Bulgaria and Greece.

I am assuming that Russia will ask from Turkey to provide Russia either a military base or permissions for their navigation of their military bases to protect their investments. I mean, Turkey will be a NATO member maybe in that scenario. Let me remind you, is there any country hosted United States and Russian military bases at the same time in history? Yes, there is. Kyrgyzstan, Manas Air Base. But we know how it ended at the end, so that might be a case. Yes.

RUBIN: If I could just two finger that, Sinan. And Tugce, just absolutely right. It reminds me just how we have spent so much diplomatic capital over the last five or six years across both the Trump and Biden administrations, getting Cyprus to stop Russian port calls and Russian use of Cypriot's oil, only to turn around and have the Russians flip Turkey, to some extent, on us in this regard.

CIDDI: Yes, fair enough. That's — I mean, it's interesting policy projections or — you know, future predictions from both of you, but this is an open question to all, but I'll start with Gallia, if I may. You know, we may vary on the definitions of terrorism, I understand, and I take that point well.

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It's been a scholarly matter of debate forever, and we're all — you know, we all went to graduate school, and we wrestled with some of these ideas, and the terrorism aspect actually, is a deep rabbit hole, which I think we should be considerate about.

But on the issue of Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, right, where I've seen Turkey fundamentally failing to condemn, even on basic grounds — I mean, we saw President Erdogan days after the October 7 attacks call Hamas a group of Mujaheddin, right? And freedom fighters. And we see him shaking hands and hosting people like you know, before his death, Saleh al-Aroui, we've seen sort of Hamas' most senior leadership come in and go out of Turkey, who have passports issued to them by the Turkish government, right?

We — you know, for an entity that literally on October 7 ripped apart women on camera, which is — you know, horrific to even countenance, let alone watch, how are we in a situation where Turkey cannot simply condemn this? Is this just what, in your opinion, Gallia, a reflection of Erdogan's political convictions, that is through and through, a sort of Islamist that he cannot retract from — this is how he is programmed historically or is this just you know, a tactical strategy?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So, first of all, I agree with you that — I mean, this definition of terror is not just an intellectual thing we do, but I think Turkey well understands that what Hamas did is terrorism. I think there's no country that can sympathize with Israel more than Turkey. And I think deep down, they know that.

I think they know that they are living in a glass house themselves. And I'm a little bit even more sympathetic to their concern from the Syrian Kurds because we remember how Syria yet was used by the PKK in the 1990s against Turkey. So I'm a little bit more sympathetic here.

Also, I agree with you that since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the Syrian Kurds have not presented a concrete threat to Turkey, it's only historically been a threat.

So, they do have this terror and they — the — their terror threats comes from different way — places, also from ISIS. I can compare the terrible Reina nightclub terror attack of ISIS to this Nova music festival attack by Hamas. Both were basically targeting young people who were dancing and having a good time and were completely helpless in face of the terrorists.

So, I think it's a mistake on behalf of Turkey. I think Turkey's friends should remind Turkey that it's a mistake. And why is Turkey doing it? Then yes, there is the theology, the Muslim Brotherhood joint ideology that is directing Erdogan.

I think Erdogan is honestly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and thinks that Hamas is promoting it, but — and that you can differentiate between Hamas political branch and Hamas military branch, but I think this is complete — it was nonsense before October 7th, and it's definitely nonsense now.

And there's also the money issue, yes all this illicit money laundering is profitable to both — to someone, but — and again, I think here, Turkey's friends should jump in and also the US and make it clear that this is not profitable anymore, because it will have ramifications and it's much easier — or not much easier, but it's much better to do — to sanction illicit funding than to do war.

And I think that's where the international community should come in, the US, the EU, they're in the right direction, but they should be more insistent on it.

CIDDI: And Michael?

RUBIN: If I may really quickly, Sinan, the thing that I think needs to be brought out, and I agree with Gallia is this isn't new. I remember — I think it was in February of 2006, I was actually in Ankara in, I believe, CNN Turk, the TV studio, when word came that Hamas' leader, I guess at the time Khaled Mashal, had undertaken a surprise visit to Turkey.

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The reason why it was a surprise visit was just two weeks before, Recep Tayyip Erdogan had told German Chancellor Angela Merkel that he would not invite Hamas out — in solidarity with the European and the Western position that Hamas shouldn't be legitimized after the 2006 elections until it agreed to the fundamentals of the Oslo Accords — that is recognition of the state of Israel and forswearing terrorism.

Erdogan turned around and simply exposed himself as a liar, and again, he tried to have it both ways by then telling the West, "Well, I didn't invite them, it was the AKP, it was the political party." Nevertheless, they had red carpet treatment and so forth. This game has been going on for close to 20 years.

What amazes me is how long western diplomacy can be like Charlie Brown, Lucy and the football, making the same mistakes 17, 18, 19 times in a row.

CIDDI: Tugce jump in if you have a...

VAROL: Just last comment — I mean, knowing Erdogan for more than two decades, I think he would prefer to die instead of condemning a terror — Islamist terrorist organization, OK?

CIDDI: Yes, I mean, one of the things I've thought about — you know, it reminded me, all of your comments, which is I remember this sort of heyday of, you know, Turkey as the model country that was sort of visited upon the outgoing Bush administration and the incoming Obama administration as a sort of model country.

I remember when it was thick as thieves with the Gülen movement in Washington to essentially, really sort of have a congressional caucus that supported Turkey, that really sort — you know, projected as a shining jewel in the Muslim world, especially in the region. Only a few years after, during — you know, the height — at the height of the Arab uprisings failure, people started to ask in Washington, what — you know, what changed? Why has Erdogan changed? Why is he going full in support of — you know, the Muslim Brotherhood? Why is he not essentially, you know, backing democratic movements? How do we explain the things like his entrenchment with the Russian Federation?

You know — and my answer to this has always been quite simple — I mean, nothing changed, right? Erdogan has been schooled in political Islam for all of his political career, his entire upbringing and upbringing as an individual, but as a — as — also as well as a political actor.

You're not going to change a 70-year-old — you know, world view, and he was 48 when he came to power. You know, I'm 46, and I don't think my political views are going to change at this point.

And so, you know, Erdogan has been kind of coy, I would say, over a number of years, but I agree with Michael's sentiment too that, you know, this game has been going on for a long, long time, and you know, it's — per Tugce's comment, I don't think he's going to condemn anybody.

But I would also caution Turkey, as you have Tugce, which is to suggest — and — and Gallia, that some of this could really come to bite Turkey in the behind if, you know, its continuing — what — its continuing support for jihadist entities in Syria, what happens when those are terminated? What about the remnants of ISIS fighters that are sort of, you know, domiciled inside of Turkey, who occasionally launch terror attacks?

None of these questions have an answer.

So, we've got a few minutes left here, about just under five minutes, and I want to go around and just ask you a hypothetical question and get your feedback on this. I'll let Michael go first. So you know, as we said, Foreign Minister Fidan is visiting Washington this week. He talked to the foreign — Turkish Prime Minister — sorry, Secretary Blinken yesterday, I believe.

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You know, if you were in the position of advising the Secretary of State, what would you want him to convey right now in relation to the events that — you know, the topics that we've talked about? What would you — be your asks to convey to the Secretary of State that he can confer to his Turkish counterpart?

RUBIN: Well, number one, it's just a matter of what we shouldn't do. We shouldn't allow Erdogan ever to step foot in the White House again. We shouldn't give him a platform to condemn — to praise Hamas from the center of Washington, DC.

I would also suggest that we should play the same game that Erdogan plays, whereas we can be diplomatically cordial to Hakan Fidan, but if Congress, for example, wants to go a little bit further and apply Global Magnitsky Act sanctions or at least cast doubt on the support, which Fidan get — Hakan Fidan gets in Washington, that would be useful.

Remember, for all the anti-Americanism that exists in AKP circles, there's still a belief that Washington's endorsement matters. This is why Recep Tayyip Erdogan relied on Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle to show him around Washington back shortly before he became Prime Minister.

We need to do everything possible to suggest that number one, our support isn't free, if it's coming at all, that Turkey needs to act first.

CIDDI: Gallia?

LINDENSTRAUSS: So, I mean, for — I think — and it's probably because I'm Israeli, but not only that the October 7th is a watershed event, I think Turkey's getting nothing of its support of Hamas. It's not getting any role in mediation, it's getting only shame and what I think — I mean, if it can't condemn it publicly, as you both suggested, then it can — but it can make the life of Hamas operative on Turkish soil much harder. It can expel them, it can stop giving them passports. Why are you giving them passports? There's a lot Turkey can do, and that will be very beneficial, also to the Palestinians and the Palestinian cause.

CIDDI: Last but not least, Tugce?

VAROL: It's a paradox for United States' foreign policy right now, right? Turkey's position — how — you need to keep Turkey in the NATO allies, but at the same time, you need to maybe sanction in some areas.

So, from foreign policy perspective, I would not give Turkey to continue its illegal financial activities, because it's a huge crime, very important crime. But at the same time, unfortunately, from geopolitical perspective, I will try to keep Turkey in the NATO as much as I can, yes.

CIDDI: Yeah, thank you for all of this. I would just end on my sort of small two cents on this to make time, which is to suggest that I agree with Michael that it would be a monumental mistake, as some have alluded to, that you know, if President Biden was to welcome Erdogan at the White House as part of an agreement of the Swedish accession deal, right? Simply because if that occurs, I would not hold it against Erdogan to admonish the U.S. President outside the White House on the — in the Rose Garden on the South Lawn and praise Hamas in a similar way that he did to the German Chancellor on German soil, which I would — which is just simply unforgivable.

We should avoid that mistake.

Look, thank you for everything, guys. We are out of time, and we thank you for your time. And we thank you to all of our audiences and to FDD's communications team for making this all possible. Thank you.

VAROL: Thank you so much.

RUBIN: Thank you.

LINDENSTRAUSS: Thank you. Thank you.



Turkey: A Sanctuary for Terrorist Entities & Illicit Finance

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END