

March 12, 2026

*Featuring Henri J. Barkey and Steven A. Cook*

*Moderated by Sinan Ciddi*

*Introductory remarks by Jonathan Schanzer*

**SCHANZER:** Hello. I am Jonathan Schanzer, executive director at Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Today is Thursday, March 12th, and we're pleased to have you here for this timely discussion.

Today, as the war with Iran reshapes the strategic landscape of the Middle East, Turkey is navigating one of the most complex geopolitical dilemmas in its modern history. Between its long border with Iran and its role as a NATO ally, Ankara understands that this conflict carries high stakes.

The balancing act has been almost acrobatic. Turkish leaders have condemned U.S. and Israeli military strikes on Iran while simultaneously warning Tehran against expanding the conflict. The Turks intercepted an Iranian missile in its airspace but they're now reportedly investigating it as a false flag operation, with the apparent aim of giving the Iranians a ladder to climb down from this escalation.

True to its DNA and its geography, the Turkish regime of Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hedging between competing interests between East and West, but for Ankara, the stakes extend well beyond diplomacy. The prospect of regime collapse in Iran raises fears of new security threats along Turkey's eastern frontier.

At the same time, the conflict presents opportunities for Turkey to expand its regional influence. Ankara has already established footholds of various shapes and sizes in Gaza, Lebanon, the West Bank, Syria, Iraq, and the Horn of Africa, and beyond. Turkey's recent deployment of F-16s to Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus could mark new efforts to extend power and influence.

Here to assess Turkey's priorities, anxieties, and strategic calculations as the war in Iran unfolds is Sinan Ciddi, director of FDD's Turkey Program. He's joined by Henri Barkey and Steven Cook, both senior fellows for Middle East studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Before I turn the conversation over, a few words about the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. At FDD, we conduct actionable research with the aim of strengthening U.S. national security and reducing or even eliminating threats posed by adversaries and enemies of the United States and other free nations. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding.

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With that, Sinan, over to you.

**CIDDI:** Thank you, Jon, and we're going to dive right in from there. So welcome, everybody, to FDD's event on Turkey. I'm going to start with you, Henri, and the same question will go to Steven.

At the outset of the Iran war on February 28th, Turkey condemned the U.S. strikes and offered its condolences to the people of Iran for the death of Ali Khamenei and also just wished for the end of the war as quickly as possible.

Turkey's long worried about, and wanted to avoid, the possibility that Iran's Islamic regime would attempt to be overthrown by an external power, especially the United States and Israel. So, given that Turkey and Iran though are historic rivals, why is Ankara not cheering on the potential divide – demise of the Islamic Republic?

**BARKEY:** Well, you say that Iran and Turkey are historical rivals, but if you look at the last – the period since the revolution, so to say, Iran has, in some ways, marginalized itself, other than of course with (inaudible), and has had few, very few, friends, whereas Turkey, by contrast, has become economically stronger, much better integrated in the rest of the world.

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So, Iran is really not a competitor. What is worse essentially for Turkey would be if Iran were to come up with a regime that is, shall we say, more modern, more willing to engage with the rest of the world and give up on its activities on the terrorism area. That – then it would be, it would be a competitor to Turkey. At the moment, it is not a competitor, it's just – I think Turkey likes that.

**CIDDI:** Steven, what do you think?

**COOK:** Well, I think, you know, I would never disagree with Henri about anything like that. And first, let me just say how nice it is to be with both of you today.

I think that the Turks look at this situation in – and are concerned about it in two ways. One, in similar to the way in which they looked at Iraq throughout the 1990s and throughout the run up to and after the U.S. invasion there, quite concerned about instability on their borders, and I think this runs across the political spectrum in Turkey.

Chaos on borders is not anything any country would want. I think the Turks have been extremely sensitive to that and extremely sensitive to the fact that the United States seems to be the one that is creating instability on their borders. So, I think that that's one thing.

I think the other thing is, once again, the Israelis are demonstrating a significant military prowess and technological sophistication here. And then a – unlike Operation Rising Lion or the 12-Day War, the cooperation and coordination from the United States is actually open and together. Israeli and American pilots launching from the same airfield, conducting operations not just next to each other but together.

And Secretary of Defense Hegseth, on Monday, after the hostilities began, talking about the importance of capable allies is clearly talking about Israel. Now, you know, everybody seems to believe that the Turks are capable, but I wonder if they, you know, they could match, at least in terms of what the Israeli Air Force has demonstrated it's capable of doing.

So, I think those two things are probably unsettling Ankara right now, the prospect of long-term instability.

The regime in Tehran hasn't collapsed as quickly as either folks in Washington or in Israel believed. It may hang on, but it may hang on in a way where it is greatly weakened but still potent and quite vengeful. So – and with, you know, restive populations, that's just – no country would want to be on the border of a country with that kind of profile.

**CIDDI:** Yeah, I think that makes sense. So, it's somewhat clear to me why Turkey is reluctant and disinterested on sort of seeing it become involved directly into this military conflict matrix.

But on the other hand, let's look at it from Iran's perspective. Well, if Turkey has concerns, then we are saying, Henri, that Iran may have less concerns? Because over the last 10 days or so, we have seen at least two missiles originating from Iran, ballistic missiles with an apparent trajectory to target Turkey, although there's some disagreement about that.

But let's assume that they were intended to target Turkey. What does that say about Iran? I mean, the prevailing wisdom is that it – you know, Iran is reluctant to strike a NATO country, especially Turkey, and which carries the risk of not necessarily just, you know, eliciting Turkey's response – military response – but potentially a NATO sort of response. Because, you know, Turkey could call into consultation Article 4 of the NATO – North Atlantic Treaty – or even Article 5.

So how do we explain, you know, Iran's posture towards Turkey in this war? I mean, are they interested in striking Turkey? Do they want to sort of antagonize the Turks? How do we explain this?

**BARKEY:** Well, first of all, let me say that I'm not sure those missiles were destined to go to Turkey, right? They could have gone to Cyprus, where there are British bases which have been used. So, that's number one. Number two, I would think that the command-and-control of the Iranian forces at the moment must have deteriorated considerably, which means that we don't know who fired those missiles.

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First of all, as I said, I – not sure they were destined to go to Turkey, and the fact that there were – when they were shot down, one was over Gaziantep; it must have been quite far from the – the trajectory doesn't show that it was the – an American base in Turkey, but I think the Iranians would not want to upset the Turks. In fact, both times when the missiles crossed Turkish airspace, the Turkish government called in the Iranian ambassador and gave them, shall we say, a little smacking.

And then – and also Erdogan warned publicly the Iranians about doing this. He said, “Don't make my life more difficult,” essentially. Especially since he's been – he was quite supportive of the Iranian regime.

So, A, we don't know who fired those missiles. And two, we don't know if they were really destined towards Turkey. And I think because of these, it hasn't – I don't think the Iranians are deliberately provoking the Turks.

**CIDDI:** Yeah, OK, I mean, that's – I don't necessarily disagree with that.

But, Steven, what you think? I mean, I saw that Patriot missile batteries were deployed to Malatya, the state – you know, the observation, the tracking station there, which is a NATO installation. I mean, it seems to me a logical target to even strike Incirlik this (inaudible) or even the oil pipeline that goes from Baku to Ceyhan that supplies a lot of Israeli oil put onto tankers from Turkey.

What do you think?

**COOK:** Yeah, I mean, look – I think it's hard to know. The Iranians have made much of the fact that they've gone to this mosaic defense where, you know, it doesn't really matter what's happened to command-and-control. In Tehran you have essentially 31 different army and IRGC units that can operate independently of each other. And so, we don't know what the motivation is exactly.

But if you look at the – what the Iranians have targeted in the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states and Jordan, it's American installations, American radar installations, oil infrastructure, as well as luxury hotels and airports and things along those lines. But those things, American installations and oil, would be consistent with the idea that the Iranians might target the radar installation in Malatya or even Incirlik or perhaps Baku-Ceyhan pipeline.

We don't really know. I mean, I think, Henri, you know – if you look at the trajectory of these things, you don't really know. But nevertheless, I think it's perfectly consistent with an Iranian strategy, such that there is one, to put pressure on American partners so that they in turn will put pressure on the United States to stop.

It's backfired so far in the Gulf. I think, you know, the Turks may have called in the Iranian ambassador but are clearly not willing to take much – more steps other than to denounce, warn, and continue to suggest that Turkey would be an excellent mediator here, which is what the Turks would do in any kind of conflict.

Are the Iranians purposely trying to provoke the Turks? It seems to me it would be a dumb thing for the Iranians to do. But, again, as command-and-control deteriorates and even as, you know, coherence of IRGC is diminished, it may very well be that, you know, some individual commander may decide that they want...

**CIDDI:** Yeah, I agree with that.

**COOK:** It's one of the risks associated with this. You know, there's a lot of doom and gloom in the commentary. We are only 12 days into it. So, we'll have to see as things go on whether the Iranians got the message that they shouldn't do it and whether that message was well-received by the people who are firing on Turkey.

**CIDDI:** Okay, Steven...

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**BARKEY:** I want to add something to this. Look, I think another thing, and this is a hypothesis, I'm not – Erdogan hasn't called me. I'm not – when he calls Steve. But...

**CIDDI:** Right. We got the picture in the background there. Erdogan looking on.

**BARKEY:** Right. But the thing here is that I think...

(CROSSTALK)

**BARKEY:** I also suspect that Erdogan one was probably a little upset that the batteries that were ultimately responsible for shooting down those ballistic missiles were not Turkish; they were the ones that came from abroad. So, it made Turkey a little bit, shall we say, unable to defend itself, right? Turkey, with its vast military and very proud of their military, they had to rely on Patriot missile batteries that came as part of the NATO contingent, right? So, it wasn't Turkish missiles that brought it down.

**CIDDI:** Yeah, and it's worth probably pointing out that when they say NATO missiles shot it down, what – unless I'm mistaken, my reading of this is that those defensive missiles that shoot down the Iranian projectiles were from U.S. warships. But it also underscores the fact that, you know, Turkey purchased the S-400 system back in 2019 and it still has no air defense that it has deployed to mitigate sort of missile attacks. It's probably worth underscoring that.

But I don't have this question on it, but it's worth probably inserting here, and a question for either, but let's get Steven to take it first, if he wants.

But you know – is this something that – is Turkish participation in the war against Iran something that the administration in Washington would welcome? And/or if missiles do strike Turkey in the future after we speak, what would a NATO position be, assuming that Turkey would try and, you know, call upon NATO for more direct action and involvement?

Anyone take it, but, Steven, you want to sort of...

**COOK:** I don't detect any effort on the part of the administration to ask for any partners or allies to join in the fight. And I don't detect any pressure from GCC states to join in. I think the perspective there is, as long as Israel and the United States are continuing to diminish the capacity of Iran to fire on them, that's a good thing.

I think that I don't see any appetite in Ankara, and I don't see any appetite in Washington, to invite the Turks into this operation, especially given the fact that you have significant tension between Israel and Turkey on separate but related issues here. So, I don't think that there's really any chance of that happening.

And, of course, all of the war planning that went into this presumed that the United States and Israel would be able to crack open the regime and make it possible for the Iranian people to bring it down. So, you know, suddenly inserting others into the war plan, and unless under some extreme circumstances, doesn't necessarily seem to be in the cards.

And I don't think we're in extreme circumstances, like, you know, there's been a lot of comps – sky is falling commentary, I don't think it's been as easy as the Israelis or the United States believe, but I don't think that, you know, the sky is falling just yet. If you only pay attention to memes on the internet, the sky is falling. But I don't think that's really actually the case.

So, I think your question about NATO's position is, largely, a theoretical one. But we can tell from the responses of our European partners and our allies how they view this.

The French are actually having a pretty good war here. They've, you know – they've sent equipment to the UAE. They are, you know, sending to help defend Cyprus. Obviously, the British have been much more reluctant, but, eventually, have relented. The Germans don't really want to criticize the United States.

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I think that the Poles – very important NATO ally – are worried about how this detracts from the attention to Ukraine, which is, obviously, the most important thing for them. And, you know, the Spanish who, you know, are an afterthought in NATO, you know, essentially, written themselves out of this, not that they would provide much value added to begin with.

I think the big NATO ally that could potentially add value added would be Turkey, but, right now, there doesn't seem to be a need for it, or necessarily a coherent NATO approach, other than to, I think, protect European assets and, obviously, Cyprus, even though it's not a member of NATO.

**CIDDI:** Henri?

**BARKEY:** Yes. Look, the only thing I would add to what Steve said – I mean, imagine how it would look at home if Turkey entered the war against Iran with Israel and the United States, right? I mean, so...

**CIDDI:** Good point.

**BARKEY:** It will never happen.

**COOK:** Correct.

**CIDDI:** That being said, I mean, I've seen reports that Turkey is the parent company of the U.S. subsidiary – I think it's REPKON, the defense contractor – that is building munitions in Texas to resupply the Israelis in terms of precision bombs. The company is owned by Turkey and that kind of sort of sits quite funny.

**COOK:** Well, I think that that's a way in which Turkey and other countries in Europe are sidestepping their opposition and adversarial relationships with Israel.

You know, the Spaniards who've been, you know, way out ahead of everybody else, in terms of boycotting Israeli defense articles and boycotting Israeli goods, are nevertheless buying equipment from Rafael, the big Israeli defense company, through its European subsidiaries. So, that doesn't surprise me at all.

Although, you know, I suspect that given the politics in the United States over both the operation in Gaza, and now, this, that, in time, the Israelis are going to produce a lot of this – these munitions entirely on their own.

**CIDDI:** Yes. Well, OK.

So, I think, to use Steven's word, Iran beckoning to – Iran beckoning Turkey to war would be a "dumb idea," quote. And I don't disagree with that. I think it really – given what they're putting out or what they're facing, a dual onslaught from the United States and Israel is already keeping them busy enough.

But there is a scenario, Henri, in terms of all scenarios, that Turkey could potentially be forced into the war. So, let's just spend a moment or two just considering. What are some of the factors do you think could result in Turkey being drawn into this conflict from a military perspective?

**BARKEY:** Look, I've – to be honest with you, I don't really see many ways in which Turkey will feel obliged. Look, if there's a major refugee crisis – I mean, Turkey has suffered from refugee crisis in the past, I mean, whether it was the Iraq war, and then later on it was Syria. And they – Turkey has – at one point, have 3.5 million Syrian refugees living in its territory.

So, the one thing it does not want to see is obviously another refugee inflow and rightly so. I mean, they seem to be the final destination because they can't go anywhere else from there, the refugees. So, in order to prevent the refugees from coming, would Turkish forces cross into Iran and create some kind of a zone or a perimeter beyond which those refugees would not move forward? That's one possibility.

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People have also speculated on Iranian Kurds taking the – shall we say, taking advantage of the situation and President Trump. First of all, it would be great if they joined, and then he changed his mind. But the truth is that the Iranian Kurds are in no position to make much of a difference on the ground anyway. There are some Iranian fighters – Iranian Kurdish fighters in Iran, KDPI and PJAK forces, but they're not very significant.

I mean, there, the game is, if the Israelis and the Americans have been bombing installations in Iranian Kurdistan, that undermines the ability of the regime to maintain law and order and repress the Kurds. The Kurds may, ultimately, assume some kind of autonomy. I mean, I use that word carefully. I don't mean formal autonomy but start running their own region.

Would Turkey try to prevent that from happening? It's interesting. I mean, how confident the Turkish foreign minister talking about the Iranian Kurds was actually much softer in his language than the language he used against the Syrian Kurds.

They were far more worried about the Syrian Kurds, in part, because the Syrian Kurds were adopted by Turkish Kurds. I mean, immediately, there was very strong relationship, and they were all then, originally, PKK had created them. So, they don't have the same relationship with Iran. I don't see the Turks joining the war at the moment.

**CIDDI:** Henri, that's a really good piece for you to write about, because there is this widespread assumption that the Kurdish question could be the sort of ultimate, sort of, explosive or catalyst that could compel...

**COOK:** I think it's a great idea.

**CIDDI:** Yes, I think it's a great idea. Henri, we've tasked you.

**BARKEY:** Well, I did it already for CFR. It's on the CFR website.

**COOK:** No, but you should do a bigger piece about how the Kurdish issue is mostly being discussed by people who don't really understand the Kurdish issue, and that there are differences here, and that it may not be as explosive in Turkish politics.

**BARKEY:** Well, one of the Kurdish-Iranian Kurdish groups is PJAK. PJAK is a PKK creation...

**COOK:** Right.

**BARKEY:** ...just like the Syrians were. But there is not that affinity between Turkish Kurds and PJAK. I mean, PJAK is somewhat over there, maybe because they haven't done much over the last 10 years. But there was a great deal of support, and there still is a great deal of support for Syrian Kurds. That's very different.

**COOK:** I mean, there, you've just proven the point that Sinan originally made.

But I just want to get in on this question of what, you know, could we conceive of Turkey responding? And, you know, I'm, certainly, aligned myself with Hendri's remarks here where, it seems remote, but, you know, what happens if a missile is fired and it does – and it's not intercepted and it kills...

**CIDDI:** Right. Hits a hospital, a school.

**COOK:** ...will they do what the Gulf has done, which is absorb it and issue condemnation and reserve the right to do something in the future, which has been the standard formula for America's partners in the Gulf?

I mean, part of me thinks, yeah, that's sort of the play. But the other part of me thinks that that kind of undermines the, you know, tough guy image of the president, and it demonstrates that Turkish airspace and sovereignty is compromised. And I wonder, you know, if there's significant bloodshed what the Turks might do.

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Again, even under those circumstances, I think they may not – they might not get involved. But, of course, my default over the last two and a half years is to dismiss things when people say something will never happen, because too many things that people said could never happen have actually happened.

So, I suspect that analysts and observers should really keep the possibility within their realm of analysis that there is a, however insignificant, a possibility. It's more significant than it was a few years ago, I think.

**BARKEY:** Well, Steven, look. Let's assume one, two missiles cross into the – into Turkey and do serious damage. What will the Turks do? Go into Iran? Where will they go? I mean, the place is being bombed...

**COOK:** All I'm saying is I don't want to dismiss it completely out of hand, right?

**BARKEY:** I will dismiss it completely out of hand.

**COOK:** The year before the July 2016, I was told the era of Quds is over. I was told that the civil military relations problem in Egypt had been resolved by Hosni Mubarak.

I just don't want to be so definitive. I don't want to be so definitive about it. And we are in a new era where Turkey sees itself as the, you know, primary actor in the region. It is a Middle Eastern power. It's a Muslim power. It's a regional power in a lot of ways. And that's the messaging that's been sent for over a period of time.

Do they absorb a missile getting through? I think probably, but I don't know that, you know, that the calculation is, "definitely not going to respond."

**CIDDI:** Yes, it's a great hypothetical, one worth sort of underscoring.

You know, it would very much depend upon arguably – look, what the missile fell on. If it's a school or a mosque or a hospital. But what if it hits and kills Turkish service members in the military? I could foresee some momentum on the nationalist side of Erdogan's coalition saying, "Enough is enough, we've given them warnings." You could see a proportional response whereby the Turkish military would target by missile the origin point of the – I'm just spit-balling here.

But the larger point I'm trying to make, which is another form of a question – isn't Turkey's response to continued Iranian strikes on Turkey, potentially – or other aggressive measures that entice Turkey – isn't Turkey's response somewhat predicated upon or dependent upon what Erdogan's objectives in the Iran conflict might be?

What is he – how Turkey responds to Iran ongoing, is it dependent on what essentially Erdogan would like to see come out of this conflict? Like, what's a good scenario? Where does Erdogan want to see this?

I don't know who wants to take that one first.

**COOK:** I mean, I think we should just go back to Henri's initial comment, which is that a different kind of regime in Iran that is more successful, more integrated in the world, that is, you know, one that is not a threat to its neighbors, is a challenge to Turkey. Because that's essentially – Turkey has wanted to say that it is that – essentially, that country.

You go back to the early days of the AKP, the kind of "Islam's third way." If you have a change in regime in Iran, that's just different, and not an IRGC, not an Islamic Republic lite, if the regime really falls. And things like – its nuclear program and its ballistic missile program and its proxies are no longer an issue, and it focuses on economic development and opening to the world. One would think that this would be a good thing in terms of regional integration, and so on and so forth. I'm not sure Erdogan looks at it that way, given his proclivity for wanting to see Turkey as the leading country, as the Muslim power, et cetera, et cetera.

**CIDDI:** Yes.

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**BARKEY:** What I would say here is everybody in Turkey now, from the left to the right, is convinced now that Israel wants to be the hegemonic power in the region, right? And this is part...

**CIDDI:** Right.

**BARKEY:** ...of that effort.

And if Israel becomes a hegemonic power, then Turkey's role diminishes. I mean, I think the grandiose plans that Turkey has had for itself, or for Erdogan has had for Turkey, essentially kind of get devalued. Of course, they don't understand that the country of – the size of Israel is unlikely to be hegemonic power.

But more importantly, if you go back to the '60s and the '70s, the Israelis had something called the periphery strategy, something that circled the Arab countries. I mean, remember, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi, all of those countries – Egypt – were hostile to Israel, completely hostile. So, what Israel did was to improve relations with Turkey, with Iran, and the Kurds, right? Those were the three members of the periphery.

So, looking at it from the perspective of Turkey – I mean, I don't know if they know about the periphery strategy, but it is possible that the Turks will see that an Iran that is, shall we say, integrated with the rest of the world – shall we say, "semi-democratic" or on the way to democracy, on the way to becoming a more liberal state – will have much better relations with Israel.

And they already...

**COOK:** Israel has much better relations with Arab countries than it did.

**BARKEY:** Right.

**BARKEY:** And so...

(MULTIPLE SPEAKERS)

**BARKEY:** ...then Turkey becomes really isolated. So, the last thing – my guess is, the last thing Erdogan want to see is for, shall we say, normal country to emerge instead of this current regime in Tehran.

**COOK:** The only counterargument – the only counterargument to that is the current thinking in important Arab capitals, which is, you know, "We don't love Erdogan, but we'd rather have him in the tent than him outside the tent."

So, there would still be this effort on the part of important Arab countries – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE – to make sure that Erdogan isn't overtly or outwardly hostile to them.

But, overall, in the main, I think Henri is correct on this; that a new regime, which it seems that we're far away from at the moment – but, again, of course, anything has happened and we're early on in a campaign, unless the president wakes up tomorrow and decides it's over, which is entirely possible – but I think that is a concern in Ankara that Israel gains in the region as a result.

I think what's interesting about your initial point, Henri, is that people across the political spectrum, and sophisticated people, see Israel as wanting to be a regional hegemon without an analytic appreciation for the fact that, you know, the Iranians raise, you know, three, four, five, maybe seven armies to destroy Israel.

And that, you know, a sort of blithe dismissal of Israel's threat perception here. After all, the Israelis have been absorbing ballistic missile strikes. And so, the idea that the Israelis are just out there to be the regional hegemon, you know, from the Nile to the Euphrates seems to me to be excessively conspiratorial.

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And I started reading something the other day from someone who I consider a very sophisticated observer of the Turkish scene. I mean, that was basically the argument. I think it hampers Turkey's ability to see what's happening and its approach to it, you know, in a realistic way.

**CIDDI:** It happen...

**BARKEY:** Look, I...

**CIDDI:** Can I just add a question here, Henri, and you can jump in on this.

Because it underscores an interesting point, because we heard former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett suggest that Turkey is the next Iran. And I have started hearing from inside of Turkey suggesting that, you know, there's a not unsizeable portion of governing elite circles, which do believe that Israel will turn its attention next onto Turkey militarily, or some derivative thereof, after it's finished with Iran.

That sort of narrative seems to be gaining traction amongst Turks, suggesting that. What do you guys think of this?

**COOK:** Well, I'll start and I'll hand it off to Henri. I mean, you know, the counter is that I had a conversation with a number of Israelis who are looking for ways to de-conflict with Turkey, saying, "We want to de-conflict with Turkey and Syria. We don't want to have a conflict with Turkey and Syria."

And the fact that, you know, the Turkish political elite and government elite think that this is what the Israelis are going to do is, again, this fundamental misreading. Now, maybe that's all being done just for political purposes. I mean, I think Erdogan gains by whipping up the, you know, anti-Zionist, antisemitic kind of fury in Turkey. At the same time, I think, you know, Naftali Bennett is also, you know, wants to be the next prime minister. And I think that the fact that the Turks chose not to be constructive after October 7 and instead, you know, call the Israelis "Hitler" and Netanyahu "worse than Hitler" because he has the support of the United States. And allowing Hamas to run operations against Israel and using its financial network, I mean, all these things that you all at FDD have done terrific work on. There is a reservoir within Israel that says, "Yeah, Turkey is an enemy state."

What I think the difference is here is that it all – everything I'm getting from kind of Israeli professional security and diplomatic channels is that "We want to find a way to de-conflict with Turkey. Perhaps some sort of mechanism in Syria will lead toward our ability to have a dialogue with them on more complicated issues."

But, you know, I don't see the Israelis want to do it. And again, like I said – I'm surprised that even sophisticated observers of Turkey are all deep in this idea that the Israelis are going to take on Turkey next. I've been in Israel, and I've been in Turkey, and I find that to be, you know, just ridiculous.

I think the Israelis are groping for a way to kind of manage their relationship with Turkey and hopefully – hope it gets better.

**BARKEY:** I agree. Look, Erdogan, I think two days ago, said that Turkey is next on Israel's list of – and there are even articles that suggest that the reason the Kurdish process was started by Devlet Bahçeli was because they needed to essentially take care of a domestic problem, their soft underbelly. Because the Israelis are coming and the Israelis are going to make use of the Kurdish weakness that the Turks have.

Again, I mean – it's very easy for people in Turkey to make up all these conspiracy theories. But fundamentally, for a country the size of Israel and a country that is completely dependent on international trade – Turkey is an important country.

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Turkey and Israel actually had a great deal of trade between them, over \$5 billion a year. And it would make much more sense for Israel to work with Turkey, just like it used to, and maybe invest in Iran together. I mean, the positive aspects of an Israeli-Turkish relationship is actually quite appealing. But now we are – I would say on both sides, there's a great deal of dislike for each other, precisely because of the rhetoric that has built up over the years, right?

But the interesting thing here is also how Erdogan is very – is trying to be very careful. Yes, he criticized the attack on Iran by Israel and the United States. But until a few months ago – until essentially, until Trump came to power – the main enemy was the United States. It was not Israel. It was the United States that was fomenting trouble in Turkey for – United States.

So now that there's a president whose more sympathetic to him, and he's not pushing him on all his buttons. He's trying to be more careful and pushing the blame. I mean, he has to have an enemy because he's running for – he's trying to find a coalition that will give him early elections and therefore stay in power.

But he does have to have an enemy against which – so, Israel, in some ways, becomes a very convenient enemy. And convenient in the sense that you have an Israel that clearly is much more capable than most people expected, right, and is now willing to take on Iran not once but twice. So, it's a very useful and convenient enemy now, is to replace the United States.

**COOK:** In combination with the United States. But I want to point out something that – and Henri alluded to it – to avoid the kind of Erdogan reductionism that people often engage in here, you know, I don't think that if Erdogan were to not be the president of Turkey anymore in whatever way, whatever fashion, and the AKP to have diminished significantly, I don't think it necessarily changes the sort of outlook among a broad range – a broader range of Turks than AKP or Erdogan supporters.

I mean, the narrative about Israel's perfidy is now baked into Turkish politics. And I think it's going to be – I don't see how it changes radically even if there is some sort of change in Turkey.

**CIDDI:** Yeah, I mean...

**BARKEY:** This is all Gaza, I mean, let's face it.

**COOK:** Right.

**CIDDI:** I was just going to add on to this. Well, OK, I mean, I understand the Israeli perspective and I've heard that too, to the extent that they are really interested in finding any creative way to prevent further escalation between Turkey and Israel. They don't want to fight them in Syria; they don't want to fight them anywhere.

I mean, Israel is aware of the fact that conflict between Israel and Turkey would be catastrophic. We put out a piece in *Haaretz* about this saying, look, it would be a really bad idea to have this. But that being said, one of the things that we're seeing in this sort of war of rhetoric between Erdogan and Netanyahu since October 7 – and now over Iran, potentially – is, well, you know, Israel is just reactive to everything that Erdogan does.

Erdogan establishes increased military presence in Somalia. Israel recognizes Somaliland and that's a major contentious issue. So, it's just blow after blow that, you know, Erdogan tries to land on the Israelis and at some point, the Israelis feel, "Well, what's going to be our red line? Do we define Turkey as a rival? Do we define Turkey as a competitor, an enemy? What is it?" And they don't seem to have a clear idea about this.

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**COOK:** Well, you know, they don't really want to. I suspect a significant reluctance among the Israelis who are concerned with this issue. And when I talk to them about it, is that they don't really want to cross that line and say, "Turkey is an enemy state." I mean, perhaps they'll go as far as saying, "Turkey is acting like an enemy state," but they never want to do that.

I think, though, that they do have an answer, you know, absent any kind of improvement of relations, absent any kind of de-confliction in Syria. Things like recognizing Somaliland are, you know, it's sort of like a twofer or a threefer for the Israelis, right? It makes the Turks uncomfortable in Somalia, and it gives the Israelis a tell-all to keep an eye on the Houthis and the IRGC or whatever's left of the IRGC when this war comes – when it comes to an end. And it seems to be, you know, strategically rational.

You know, when the Israelis do that, the Turks go kind of crazy. But then, you know, no one really has a lot to say about the Turkish investment in Somalia and military presence there as well. If that's in, you know, Turkey's national interest, it certainly can be – a case could be made that the Israeli presence in Somaliland is certainly within Israel's national security interests as well.

But again, just going back to it, I think, you know, the Israelis have said to me, "We're fighting just to be left alone. We don't want these armed groups on our borders." And that is translated in Turkish political narratives that Israel is the wannabe hegemon, a country of, you know, 10 million people the size of New Jersey with quite extraordinary military capabilities.

But to knock off a NATO ally of the United States, huge country. I mean, even if Israel's pilots are better than Turkish pilots and better equipped, this is a kind of silly idea that I think titillates people who have been just doused with wave after wave of anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

**CIDDI:** Yeah, I mean, if we bring this – the Israeli-Turkey sort of debacle or standoff – back to the Iran debate directly, here's my contention of what I think the preferred goal for Turkey is as an outcome of the Iran War. And which is, I think that Turkey desires for the existence of a weakened Islamic Republic with the Islamic regime in charge, albeit significantly – had its wings clipped.

But it really does not seek the emergence of a democratic or the potential for a democratic, representative, free Iran, if you want to call it that side. Simply because I think there are two angles to this. One is I think that Turkey could potentially continue to cooperate and work with a weakened Iran. Because a weakened Iran would essentially be able to continue working with its proxy networks, destabilize what Turkey identifies as adversaries in the region, such as Israel, but it will also allow Turkey to grow into the region as this new hegemonic power.

But it also seeks to avoid the emergence of a free and democratic Iran, because I think internally Erdogan is also going to tighten up restrictions in, you know, political opposition, dissident, and he certainly does not want the emergence of this budding potential democracy that could undercut his authoritarian tendencies.

What do you think?

**COOK:** I would discount your reason about, you know, a democratic demonstration. I just think the demonstration effect is an overblown thing. It's the political scientist in me, and I've read the literature on it. And I know, you know, we're all about that during the Arab uprisings, and that, you know, Tunisia was going to have a demonstration effect on...

**CIDDI:** Oh, yes, you're scarred by Tunisia.

**COOK:** Iran is bigger – it is a much bigger country with a lot of weight than, you know, Tunisia, obviously. But I don't buy the demonstration effect piece of it, but I do buy your first argument that, you know, a greatly weakened Islamic Republic is better off for Erdogan than any of the other kind of, you know, potential outcomes that we hear.

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One, it might seek help from Turkey, give Turkey a certain amount of leverage in Tehran. There might be useful aspects of the Islamic Republic's proxy network, certainly Hamas, or, you know, the latent proxy network – what's remaining of them, I should say – that could be useful to Turkey.

And, you know, something that emerges from this conflict that's called the Islamic Republic of Iran is a strategic defeat for Israel. I mean, you know, the Israelis, obviously, there's tactical success in taking down, if not eliminating, Iran's ballistic missile threat, damaging proxies, damaging the nuclear program, killing all kinds of regime officials.

But if regime officials emerge, and it's called the Islamic Republic, the Israelis have spent a lot of time and effort trying to create a pathway for the Iranian people to overthrow this regime. It's a defeat for Israel if that doesn't happen. And that's good for Turkey in their current adversarial relationship.

**CIDDI:** Henri?

**BARKEY:** Well, I agree with Steve. I mean, I'll just elaborate one point. A weakened Iran will be more, much more, at the beck and call of Turkey on a variety of issues. I mean, any kind of – think of whether it is oil deal or export deals, you know, buying things from Iran. Turkey will be able to exercise much more leverage and get what it wants from Iran.

So, in a way, Iran is no longer a country at par with Turkey. So, Turkey's here and Iran is here, and Iran will be very much more dependent on Turkey. I mean, it has done that in the past, as you – as Sinan – as you folks wrote about the Halkbank, et cetera, but this will be across all levels.

**CIDDI:** Yeah. Well, let me continue with you, Henri. And there is a domestic component to this which I think merits some analysis, because from the Turkish perspective – and I guess we haven't had time to digest or think about the full effects of this, but, you know, feel free to ruminate, because you've worked on Turkey for years, and I think there's a hungry constituency out there waiting for analysis.

But one of the things that's sort of missing in the analysis so far, I would say, is, look, how would Erdogan potentially benefit or try to, you know, make this into an opportunity for himself – the Iran conflict, the continuity of the Iran conflict – inside of Turkey?

I'm talking about, is he willing to use this to advance – to his advantage in curtailing further democratic freedoms, political freedoms? We know he's interested in pushing for re-election. Is there an avenue that he can use this crisis to tighten democratic governance and such that he can continue to secure his term in office?

**BARKEY:** Look, Erdogan is going to do what Erdogan wants when it comes to domestic politics in Turkey. He doesn't need any kind of outside support for that or outside excuse for that. The biggest impediment to his policies was the White House, and the White House is no longer an impediment. And the White House basically saying, "Go ahead, you can do whatever you want."

So, in terms of changing the character of Turkey, making it less democratic than what it is now...

**COOK:** How much farther does he need to go?

**BARKEY:** Right. I mean, look, we are talking at the time when the trial of Ekrem Imamoglu, the mayor of Istanbul, has just started out, a year after he was arrested. And it's a joke. I mean, they're accusing him of this vast network – mafia network, right? And it's also very, very convenient to use that kind of terminology because he goes to the White House and you said to the White House, "You know, the mafia networks, have you seen in Colombia and Mexico? This is the same thing, right? They were doing same thing in Turkey."

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It doesn't matter. I mean, Erdogan doesn't need anything. Israel becomes, as I said earlier, the whipping boy, because he always needs a whipping boy. And he can't really use the United States too much because at some points, Trump may hear of it and get upset. And Trump is unpredictable from that perspective. So – and it's also way of galvanizing people to do certain things.

The problem – this is an interesting one. I mean, when you look at Turkish reaction to what's going on in Iran now, the Kurds have not been very critical, right? And some of the stuff I read – basically Kurds say, "I'm sorry, why should we support Iran or the Arabs? They've never done anything for us." Right? And so, there is a slight, a very slight, divergence in Turkey over this issue. And, in fact – I'm sorry – what's the Kurdish leader in prison now?

**CIDDI:** Öcalan?

**BARKEY:** No, no, mayor of the...

**CIDDI:** Demirtas?

**BARKEY:** Demirtas. Demirtas issued a statement at the beginning, I mean, kind of criticizing the Israelis and Americans, and he got lambasted by his own people about why are you doing this, right? So, that's one issue where we can see maybe some influence.

But domestically, Erdogan is doing everything in his power to get re-elected. And he has now Imamoglu out of the way. He's going to get every single person out of the way and succeed. But we'll see, I mean, things can go wrong.

**CIDDI:** Steven, I want to ask the same question of you. But before you answer, let me just add this onto the tail end of what Henri said – and I'm inclined to agree with him – but one perspective that sort of potentially undercuts this strong narrative would be the economic one.

I mean, for every \$10 we're told that the price of the barrel of oil increases, put somewhere in the region of \$2 billion. I may give you – but a significant amount of foreign debt onto Turkey is already huge foreign debt. I mean, they're servicing a huge external debt. They're trying to get inflation down. The war is obviously really driving up Turkey's sort of, you know, petrochemical purchases.

And look, the people have heard Erdogan's creative narratives about foreign enemies, you know, the interest lobby, the cat lobby, this lobby, that lobby, imperialist this. This war is likely to be very costly economically to Turkey. It already is. And I'm just, you know, one of the calculations that must be going into Erdogan's head is, you know, the people are already finding it difficult as it is to buy dates for Ramadan. They can't afford meat.

**COOK:** What I would say in response to this, you know, this is you're making the case for your first question – for your question that Henri said. And I essentially agree with that, you know, Erdogan doesn't really need the excuse of anything else. He's already – you know, why do people still talk about a slide into authoritarianism? Turkey is an authoritarian. There are elections, but I think that, you know, the fact that the government can make the outcome of elections pretty much determined ahead of time says something about the quality of Turkish democracy.

But what I would say to you is, yes, you know, in times of crisis and so on so forth, Erdogan may crack down or clamp down and so on and so forth. This is stuff that he's already done. So, this is a moment of crisis and he'll do similar things. Now, those things are, certainly, they're risky, but he seems to have things fairly well in hand. I don't see the Operation Epic Fury and Roaring Lion as an excuse for Erdogan to, you know, deepen his authoritarian grip on the country because it's already pretty deep.

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And if people are upset about the price of dates or the price of gas, they know that, you know, they are in jeopardy if they express that publicly in one way or the other. They already know that. That's baked into – I keep saying that, but it's baked into Turkish politics at this point. It's been quite some time where Erdogan and the AKP have made clear that, you know, stepping out of line on things like this means an unhappy encounter with the state.

**BARKEY:** The one thing I would add – and this is a little bit speculation obviously – to what Steve said. Look, imagine if this war continues. Great damage is done to oil facilities, to the export of oil from the region, and then you have oil prices that go up to \$150, \$200 a barrel. That will affect not Turkey, but just everybody else.

So, it will be a kind of a disaster – far greater, by the way, than the post '73 oil embargo period, in the sense that the economies are far more integrated now than they were, so they have less – it's much more difficult for them to rely on their own resources. And then you will have unrest everywhere, from Washington to Paris to Istanbul and beyond. At that point, right, the people who are upset and demonstrating in the streets of Turkey or any other place – I'm not going to think of, oh, really, this is because of the war, or this or that. They would basically blame the government for not doing its job.

Not that the government – in fairness to the government, it may be impossible at \$200 a barrel to do anything. And at that point, there might be some movement in Turkey, some change as a result of this. But it would not – continuing on Steve's point about the importance of the economy, it's an outlier.

I don't think we're going to go there. I mean, I think this war is going to be over relatively soon, and you'll be able to drive your car and fill it with gas very soon, but it's a possibility.

**CIDDI:** OK. So, I'm going to finish with one final question for either of you and it's unfair and difficult. But, Steven, you should be used to this, and so I'm to put you in the hot seat, given that you still have Erdogan looking in on you.

If you could give one sort of piece of advice or something for the Turkish government to watch out for as this war continues, namely the Erdogan government, what would you tell them about this? What would your recommendation be if you had to tell them something to watch out for as this conflict...

**COOK:** I mean, I could be sneaky and go back on what I said before. I'd be like, "Oh, the Israelis are out for you guys," but no.

**CIDDI:** I don't need to tell that Ibrahim Karagul, from I think *Yeni Safak*, tells them this – in a pretty diabolic...

**COOK:** I mean, but again, you know, you have *Yeni Safak* and people who are much more sophisticated who, you know, believe this kind of stuff.

**CIDDI:** Wow. I never thought I would have these two terms together, "*Yeni Safak*" and "sophistication."

**COOK:** Right. There's just no evidence of it. But what I would say to them is, be careful what you wish for. I mean, if in fact, we're right that some kind of smaller Islamic Republic that's IRGC dominated is the best possible outcome for Turkey, this is still a kind of dangerous – potent and dangerous – wounded state.

And so, you know, they may celebrate a strategic defeat of Israel if something called the Islamic Republic comes out of this. But it's not great for the region. Because if you take the Turks out their word that they want regional stability, they're not going to get it with some rump version of the Islamic State.

**CIDDI:** Fair enough.

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**BARKEY:** I agree with Steven. I mean, look, Turkey at this point in time needs stability in its region. Right? It has already very severe economic problems. Economic problems that can only be fixed with greater growth, reduced inflation rate, and so on and so forth, and also serious economic policy.

And if you have uncertainty and instability in your – where you live, it's going to be very difficult to maintain coherent policies. And there's always, of course, the possibility that you get stuck – attracted into all kinds of fights in the region. It makes everything much more difficult, I mean. And so, you know, just hope for a stable region. The sooner the better for Turkey.

**CIDDI:** Yeah. I think ending on a note of “be careful what you wish for,” I do take that.

I would say gentlemen, thank you for your time.

**BARKEY:** Thank you.

**CIDDI:** Thank you to our listeners. I think this is one of the events in town that is seeking a lot of information about what Turkey's position is and I think that interest will only grow.

On behalf of FDD, thank you for your time again. For all our Turkey related work, please follow FDD.org. But also look at Steven and Henri's X accounts for, I would say, fresh takes on what is likely to happen or reflections on what has happened. Thank you for your time and have a good day.

**COOK:** Thank you, Sinan. See you later, Henri.

**BARKEY:** See you, yeah, in a couple of hours.

END