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# Turkey (Türkiye): Major Issues and U.S. Relations

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U.S. relations with Turkey (Türkiye) take place within a complicated geopolitical environment, reflecting some shared and some divergent perceived national interests. Turkey and other “midsize powers” such as Saudi Arabia and India seek advantages in a global system with intensifying great-power competition. Some ongoing U.S.-Turkey disagreements stem from differences in the countries’ respective policies in Syria, and from Turkey’s 2019 procurement of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system. Nevertheless, U.S. and Turkish officials emphasize the importance of the bilateral relationship on several foreign policy issues, and the significance of Turkey’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Turkey’s proximity to conflicts in the Middle East and Eurasia has made the continuing availability of its territory valuable for its allies. Turkish officials have expressed interest in joining the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, the People’s Republic of China [PRC], South Africa) group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—both of which arguably position themselves as alternatives to Western-dominated organizations like the G7 and NATO. Questions persist about whether and when Turkey might join BRICS and/or SCO, and if doing so would be a signal of greater alignment with Russia and the PRC, or of increased Turkish strategic autonomy and regional prominence.

Congressional and executive branch action regarding Turkey and its neighboring countries could have implications for bilateral ties and U.S. political-military options in the region. Congressional initiatives in the past decade have included conditions on some U.S. arms sales to Turkey, as well as support for certain sanctions against Turkey.

The question of U.S. sales of fighter aircraft and other arms to Turkey has been particularly prominent since Turkey’s 2019 S-400 acquisition and consequent removal from the F-35 program. After Turkey’s parliament approved NATO accession for Sweden in January 2024, the Biden Administration formally notified Congress of a possible \$23 billion Foreign Military Sale of 40 new F-16 aircraft, 79 modernization packages for existing F-16s, and associated munitions—apparently, a major step forward for U.S.-Turkey defense cooperation. Turkey’s strategic significance for NATO amid an evolving European security crisis after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine may have contributed to the Administration decision to advance the F-16 transaction. U.S. officials also have suggested that sanctions imposed on Turkey in 2020 for the S-400 acquisition could go away and the F-35 “conversation” can resume if U.S. and Turkish officials properly address the S-400 issue. While Turkish officials have reportedly placed the S-400 in a storage facility rather than activating it and risking additional U.S. retaliatory measures, they also have expressed unwillingness to give it up.

Turkish policies on some other key foreign policy issues have relevance for U.S.-Turkey relations:

- **Russia and Ukraine.** While Turkey’s economic and energy ties with Russia remain a cause for U.S. concern, its support for Ukraine’s defense after Russia’s 2022 invasion, limitation of Russian naval access to and from the Black Sea, and emergence as a mediator during the war has arguably increased Turkey’s importance for U.S. policy.
- **Israel and the Palestinians.** Since Hamas led attacks into Israel on October 7, 2023, and war ensued, Turkey-Israel diplomatic and economic ties have come under strain. Turkey placed some restrictions on exports to Israel in April 2024, and announced an end to all trade with Israel in May. Additionally, Turkey has continued to provide political support to Hamas, and U.S. officials have imposed sanctions on some alleged Hamas operatives or funding sources in Turkey.
- **Syria.** Sources of concern for Turkey include nearly four million Syrian refugees in Turkey, and U.S. efforts to counter the Islamic State by working with Syrian Kurds linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Kurdish acronym PKK, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization). Turkey and allied Syrian armed opposition groups have occupied various areas of northern Syria since 2016, and Turkey’s military continues to target Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq—apparently also damaging some civilian infrastructure in Syria.

Domestically, some observers voice concerns about the largely authoritarian rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has led Turkey since 2003 and consolidated his control over time—including after a failed 2016 coup attempt. Despite a serious electoral challenge in May 2023 during an economic crisis, Erdogan and his party retained power, though the government faces allegations of human rights and rule of law violations. With inflation near 70% despite measures over the past year to counter it, Erdogan’s party lost in March 2024 local elections. Analysts speculate about Erdogan’s potential interest in and prospects for another presidential term in the next national elections, scheduled for 2028.

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## Introduction: Bilateral Issues and Congress's Role

This report provides background information and analysis on key issues affecting U.S.-Turkey (Türkiye)<sup>1</sup> relations, including domestic Turkish developments and various foreign policy and defense matters. Turkey has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1952. U.S. and Turkish officials maintain that cooperation on regional security matters remains mutually important,<sup>2</sup> despite Turkey's 2019 acquisition of an S-400 surface-to-air defense system from Russia and a number of other U.S.-Turkey differences (such as in Syria and on Cyprus).

Members of Congress may consider legislative and oversight options regarding Turkey with implications for bilateral ties and U.S. political-military engagement in the region. Congressional actions in response to Turkish policy decisions diverging from U.S. stances have influenced U.S.-Turkey relations. For example, Congress authorized sanctions against Turkey and placed conditions on some arms sales in response to the Turkey-Russia S-400 transaction (see "Potential F-16 Sale and Other Defense Procurement Issues" below). Future Turkish actions affecting major issues discussed below could influence how Members approach existing sanctions, possible arms sales, and other options regarding Turkey.

U.S.-Turkey relations are complex and reflect some shared and some divergent perceived national interests. Turkey and other "midsize powers" such as Saudi Arabia and India seek advantages in a global system with intensifying great-power competition, thus partly explaining their tendency to hedge between the United States and other great powers.<sup>3</sup>

While Turkey's continued or deepening ties with Russia in energy and other areas remain a cause for concern for the Biden Administration and some Members of Congress, Turkey's support for Ukraine's defense and rapprochement with Greece and some Arab states have somewhat improved U.S.-Turkey relations. A significant sign of this improvement came in January 2024, when the Administration formally notified Congress of a potential U.S. sale of F-16 aircraft to Turkey.

The F-16 notification occurred shortly after Turkey's parliament voted to admit Sweden into the NATO. Turkey had delayed its approval of NATO membership for Sweden, and previously Finland, partly because Turkey had demanded the two countries take certain steps regarding individuals and groups (including the Kurdistan Workers' Party [Kurdish acronym PKK], a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) it deems to be terrorists. The delay had fueled U.S.-Turkey tensions, with some lawmakers expressing doubts about a possible F-16 sale until Turkey approved the two countries' NATO accession—first Finland in March 2023, then Sweden in January 2024.

Turkey continues to conduct operations within Turkey to counter the PKK, which has fought an on-and-off Kurdish nationalist insurgency with Turkish authorities since 1984, while also targeting longtime PKK bases in northern Iraq and PKK-linked groups in northern Syria (see

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<sup>1</sup> In late 2021, President Erdogan directed the use of "Türkiye" (the country's name in Turkish) in place of "Turkey" in Turkish government documents and communications. In June 2022, the United Nations accepted the Turkish request to change the country's name at the body to "Türkiye." In January 2023, the State Department spokesperson said that the department would use the revised spelling "in most formal diplomatic and bilateral contexts" where appropriate. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names retained both "Turkey" and "Republic of Turkey" as conventional names, and the spokesperson said that the State Department could use those names if it is in furtherance of broader public understanding. State Department Press Briefing, January 5, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> State Department, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism," March 9, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Kalin and Summer Said, "Saudi Prince Tests Nonaligned Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2023.

“Syria” below). The Turkish military’s approach to neutralizing the PKK has routinely been criticized by Western governments and human rights organizations for being overly hard on ethnic Kurds, who constitute about 19% of Turkey’s population (see **Figure 1**). Turkish authorities have imprisoned thousands and displaced or disrupted the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of others for suspected PKK involvement or sympathies.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Turkey at a Glance**



<b>Geography</b>	Area: 783,562 sq km (302,535 sq. mile), slightly larger than Texas
<b>People</b>	Population: 83,593,483 (2023). Most populous cities: Istanbul 15.8 mil, Ankara 5.4 mil, Izmir 3.1 mil, Bursa 2.1 mil, Adana 1.8 mil, Gaziantep 1.8 mil. (2023) % of population 14 or younger: 22.1% (2023) Ethnic groups: Turks 70%-75%; Kurds 19%; Other minorities 6%-11% (2016) Religion: Muslim 99.8% (mostly Sunni), Others (mainly Christian and Jewish) 0.2% Literacy: 96.7% (male 99.1%, female 94.4%) (2019)
<b>Economy</b>	GDP per capita (at purchasing power parity): \$43,921 Real GDP growth: 3.6% Inflation: 52.0% (as of August 2024) Unemployment: 9.0% Budget deficit as % of GDP: 5.2% Public debt as % of GDP: 30.9% Current account deficit as % of GDP: 2.7%

**Sources:** Graphic created by CRS. Map boundaries and information generated by Hannah Fischer using State Department Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); ArcWorld (2014); DeLorme (2014). Fact information (2024 projections unless otherwise specified) from International Monetary Fund (IMF); IMF World Economic Outlook

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Cengiz Candar, *Turkey’s Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*, Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Lexington Books, 2020. See also Amberin Zaman, “Turkey hands Kurdish leaders heavy sentences, dimming hopes of democratic change,” *Al-Monitor*, May 16, 2024.

Database; Economist Intelligence Unit; Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*; and the Turkish Statistical Institute.

Since the Palestinian Sunni Islamist group Hamas (another FTO) led attacks into Israel in October 2023, and war ensued, Turkey's ties with Hamas, Erdogan's criticism of Israel, and Turkish restrictions on most exports to Israel have raised additional concerns with the Biden Administration and some Members.<sup>5</sup> U.S. officials have consulted with Turkish counterparts regarding regional conflict and tensions. Following Iran's first-ever direct attack against Israel on April 13, 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a call with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to thank him for his "ongoing engagement to prevent further escalation in the region."<sup>6</sup> Media reports suggest that Turkey mediated communications between U.S. and Iranian officials as part of broader efforts to minimize the impact of direct Israel-Iran conflict.<sup>7</sup>

For additional information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

## Domestic Issues

### Political Developments Under Erdogan's Rule

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (pronounced *air-doe-wan*) has ruled Turkey since becoming prime minister in 2003, and has steadily deepened his control over the country's populace and institutions. Many observers describe Erdogan as a polarizing figure, and elections have reflected roughly equal portions of the country supporting and opposing his rule. U.S. and European Union (EU) officials have expressed a number of concerns about authoritarian governance and erosion of rule of law and civil liberties in Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

After Erdogan became president in August 2014 via Turkey's first-ever popular presidential election, he claimed a mandate for increasing his power and pursuing a presidential system of governance, which he cemented through victories in a 2017 constitutional referendum and 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. In 2016, rogue military officers staged a coup attempt in which hundreds were killed and thousands injured, after which the government detained tens of thousands, enacted sweeping changes to military and civilian agencies, and took over or closed various businesses, schools, and media outlets. Erdogan has argued, with considerable popular support, that the Fethullah Gulen movement (see text box below) orchestrated the coup attempt, which military forces and citizen groups loyal to the government ultimately thwarted.<sup>9</sup> Some leading opposition figures in Turkey have accused Erdogan of planning, controlling, and/or using the failed coup to suppress dissent and consolidate power. Since the attempt, Erdogan and his Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym AKP) have adopted more

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<sup>5</sup> "Türkiye's Erdogan Rejects US Pressure to Cut Hamas Ties," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, December 3, 2023; Emily Jacobs et al., "U.S. lawmakers call for possible sanctions against Turkey in response to new trade restrictions against Israel," *Jewish Insider*, April 9, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> State Department, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan," April 14, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> "Iran told Turkey in advance of its operation against Israel, Turkish source says," Reuters, April 14, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2023*, Turkey; European Commission, *Türkiye 2023 Report*, November 8, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Gareth Jenkins, "Five Years After July 15: Erdogan's New Turkey and the Myth of Its Immaculate Conception," *Turkey Analyst*, July 15, 2021; Dorian Jones, "Turkey Looks Back at Failed Coup," Voice of America, July 15, 2019. Partly because of Gulen's residence in the United States, many Turks reportedly subscribe to conspiracy theories about possible U.S. involvement.

nationalistic domestic and foreign policy approaches, perhaps partly because of their reliance on parliamentary support from the Nationalist Movement Party (Turkish acronym MHP).

### Fethullah Gulen and Hizmet

Gulen, who was born in Turkey between 1938 and 1941, is a former Turkish state-employed imam who left Turkey for medical treatment in the United States in 1999 and has reportedly been a permanent U.S. resident since 2008.<sup>10</sup> Gulen lives in seclusion with some of his adherents at a retreat in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. The Gulen movement or community (commonly known by supporters as *Hizmet*, or “service” in Turkish) is an array of individuals, educational institutions, and other organizations in Turkey and abroad with a connection to Gulen or his teachings. These teachings come from a distinctly Turkish brand of Islam. Over time, Gulen-inspired schools, businesses, media enterprises, charitable organizations, and civil society groups came to exercise considerable influence in Turkey. Many observers claim that the movement aligned itself with Erdogan during his first decade in power, using its social connections, international reach, and media clout to bolster AKP rule at home and abroad.<sup>11</sup> In 2013, after prosecutors brought corruption charges against several people, including some Turkish officials and others with apparent ties to Erdogan, Erdogan accused Gulen and his loyalists of an illegal effort to oust elected officials via a “parallel structure” within key state institutions. The Turkish government designated Gulen’s movement as a terrorist organization in May 2016 and accused it of perpetrating the unsuccessful July 2016 coup attempt; Gulen and his movement have denied any involvement.<sup>12</sup>

Erdogan and the AKP have had a mixed electoral track record since his 2018 presidential victory. In 2019, candidates from the secular-oriented Republican People’s Party (CHP) won the mayoralties of some major Turkish cities, defeating the AKP, including in Istanbul, Turkey’s largest city and economic hub, and Ankara, its capital.

With Turkey suffering through an economic crisis and major earthquakes in early 2023, Erdogan and the AKP were challenged in presidential and parliamentary elections held that May by a grouping of diverse opposition parties, led by the Republican People’s Party (CHP). Erdogan and the AKP-led coalition prevailed.

Commenting on the election process for the presidential run-off, a joint Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe international election observation mission assessed that the election “offered voters a choice between genuine political alternatives and voter participation remained high, however ... biased media coverage and the lack of a level playing field gave an unjustified advantage to the incumbent.... In an environment with restrictions on freedom of expression, both private and public media did not ensure editorial independence and impartiality in their coverage of the campaign, detracting from the ability of voters to make an informed choice. Election day was generally calm and well-administered. However, instances of deficient implementation of certain procedures, particularly during the vote count, were noted.”<sup>13</sup> Some analysts challenged whether the elections could be characterized as free, given the government’s reported use of state resources and allied media to boost its standing.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cameron Glenn, “Profile: Fethullah Gulen,” Wilson Center, July 18, 2016; Nahal Toosi, “The cleric, the coup and the conspiracy,” *Politico*, September 9, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Dexter Filkins, “The Deep State,” *New Yorker*, March 4, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Dylan Matthews, “Turkey’s coup: The Gulen Movement, explained,” *Vox*, September 13, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> OSCE, *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, Republic of Türkiye—Presidential Election, Second Round, 28 May 2023* (published May 29, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Soner Cagaptay, “Erdogan cements his power with a victory in Turkey’s presidential runoff election,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 29, 2023; Gonul Tol, “Erdogan Won by Exploiting Fear,” *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2023. The potential CHP presidential candidate with possibly the best chance to unseat Erdogan, Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, may have had his prospects to run in the election undermined by a criminal conviction (under broad laws prohibiting insults (continued...))

## March 2024 Local Elections

The opposition coalition splintered in the wake of the 2023 defeat, but the CHP rebounded in March 2024 local elections amid lower turnout and persistent inflation. CHP candidates defended the Istanbul and Ankara mayoralties that they had won in 2019, and also won in some additional areas while outpolling the AKP nationwide—the first time another party received more votes than the AKP in an election it contested (going back to the 2002 national election).

It is unclear what kind of lasting impact the local elections will have on Turkish political developments. President Erdoğan's five-year presidential term expires in 2028. He said in advance of the 2024 local races that they would be his “last” election, but some have speculated that he may seek to remain in office by getting a three-fifths majority of parliament to call early national elections (which arguably would allow him to run again).<sup>15</sup> Another route would be via constitutional changes; Erdoğan has previously talked of his desire to replace the 1982 military government-era constitution. While Erdoğan has come back from previous political reverses and has four years until the next scheduled national elections, the 2024 local election results may signal vulnerability in future campaigns.

## Economic Issues

For more than a decade, Turkey's currency (the lira) has been trending downward relative to the dollar, with its decline probably driven in part by broader concerns by foreign investors about Turkey's policymaking and economy.<sup>16</sup> It has lost more than 88% of its value against the dollar since 2018, with much of the decrease coming after major interest rate cuts that President Erdoğan backed from 2021 to 2023.<sup>17</sup> Official annual inflation reached a 24-year peak of 86% in October 2022.<sup>18</sup>

The currency and inflation crisis in Turkey has dramatically affected consumers' cost of living and the cost of international borrowing (mostly conducted in U.S. dollars) for banks and private sector companies. The government has sought to lessen the impact of inflation by providing tax cuts, minimum wage increases, greater access to early retirement benefits, and subsidies for basic expenses, along with protection for consumers who keep their bank accounts in liras, and borrowing incentives for banks that hold liras.<sup>19</sup> President Erdoğan has insisted that Turkey will not turn to international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance, after Turkey in 2013 paid off loans that—in the aggregate—had been outstanding for 52 years.<sup>20</sup>

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against public officials, and pending final resolution on appeal) that he and other opposition figures claim was politically motivated. Ben Hubbard and Safak Timur, “Conviction May Sideline Rival of Turkish Leader,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> “Justice minister says Erdoğan could run for presidency again if parliament calls early elections,” *Turkish Minute*, March 12, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Justin Keay, “Turkey's Positive Prospects,” *Global Finance*, March 14, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Rumeysa Koc, “Why is the Turkish lira's value still falling?” *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Jared Malsin and Elvan Kivilcim, “Erdoğan Faces Big Vote Test as Turkish Economy Suffers,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> M. Murat Kubilay, “Already vulnerable, Turkey's economy now faces massive earthquake recovery costs,” Middle East Institute, February 13, 2023; “Erdoğan offers free gas pre-election after first Black Sea field shipment,” *Reuters*, April 23, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> “Turkey pays off the last installment of its debt to IMF,” *Anadolu Agency*, May 14, 2013.

In the wake of Erdogan's May 2023 reelection, he named Mehmet Simsek—a prominent AKP figure and professional economist—as Turkey's finance minister (his second stint in the position, after serving from 2009 to 2015). Under Simsek, Turkey's central bank appears to have returned to a more orthodox approach to monetary policy in an effort to attract more foreign capital, raising its key interest rate from 8.5% to 50%—one of the highest in the world—since Simsek's appointment. As of August 2024, the rate was close to official year-on-year inflation of 52.0%.

Turkey's manufacturing-based economy has remained relatively resilient and is anchored by its customs union with the EU. Turkish officials also are continuing efforts to bolster trade and foreign direct investment with several countries, including multiple Arab Gulf states.<sup>21</sup>

### U.S.-Turkey Economic Cooperation<sup>22</sup>

Turkey's economy—the 19<sup>th</sup>-largest in the world (according to World Bank data for 2022)—presents attractions and challenges for potential U.S. trade and investment partners. The United States and Turkey have various bilateral agreements to promote economic cooperation, though no free trade agreement. Bilateral trade volume for 2022 (per the Department of Commerce) topped \$34 billion; Turkey seeks to expand it to \$100 billion.

U.S.-Turkey economic ties account for a small fraction of U.S. international trade and investment. Turkey has a far closer economic relationship with the EU (with which it has had a customs union on manufactured goods since 1995). In 2023, for merchandise trade, the United States comprised 5.8% of Turkey's exports and 4.4% of its imports (per data from the Turkish Statistical Institute). For purposes of comparison, in the same year the EU bloc comprised 40.8% of Turkey's exports and 29.3% of its imports. From 2003 to 2021, EU countries provided more than 50% of foreign direct investment in Turkey, and the United States supplied 8.1%.<sup>23</sup>

## Selected Turkish Foreign Policy Issues

As a more multipolar global system has emerged in the past decade, Turkey has sought greater independence of action.<sup>24</sup> Turkish leaders appear to compartmentalize their partnerships and rivalries with other influential countries—including other great powers such as Russia and China—as each situation dictates, partly in an attempt to reduce Turkey's dependence on these actors and maintain its leverage with them.<sup>25</sup> Observers debate whether or not this approach to foreign policy has been well-designed or -implemented.<sup>26</sup> Turkey's future foreign policy course could depend partly on the degree to which Turkish leaders feel either strengthened or constrained by their traditional security and economic ties with Western powers, and how these perceptions drive Turkey's approach to its global relationships.

As Turkish leaders determine how to best proceed in line with the foreign policy considerations described above, some features appear to have become regular parts of Turkey's policy agenda. These include:

<sup>21</sup> Ezgi Akin, "Turkey, Iraq, UAE, Qatar ink \$20B transportation deal during Erdogan visit," *Al-Monitor*, April 22, 2024; Andrew England and Adam Samson, "UAE and Turkey sign multibillion-dollar agreements," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2023; Paul Iddon, "How Saudi Arabia and UAE learned to stop worrying and love Turkey's Bayraktar drones," *Business Insider*, August 6, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> See CRS In Focus IF10961, *U.S.-Turkey Trade Relations*, by Shayerah I. Akhtar.

<sup>23</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, "FDI in Türkiye," available at <https://www.invest.gov.tr/en/whyturkey/pages/fdi-in-turkey.aspx>.

<sup>24</sup> Remarks by James Jeffrey, Atlantic Council, "Post election transatlantic relations with Turkey," May 31, 2023, at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/post-election-transatlantic-relations-with-turkey/>.

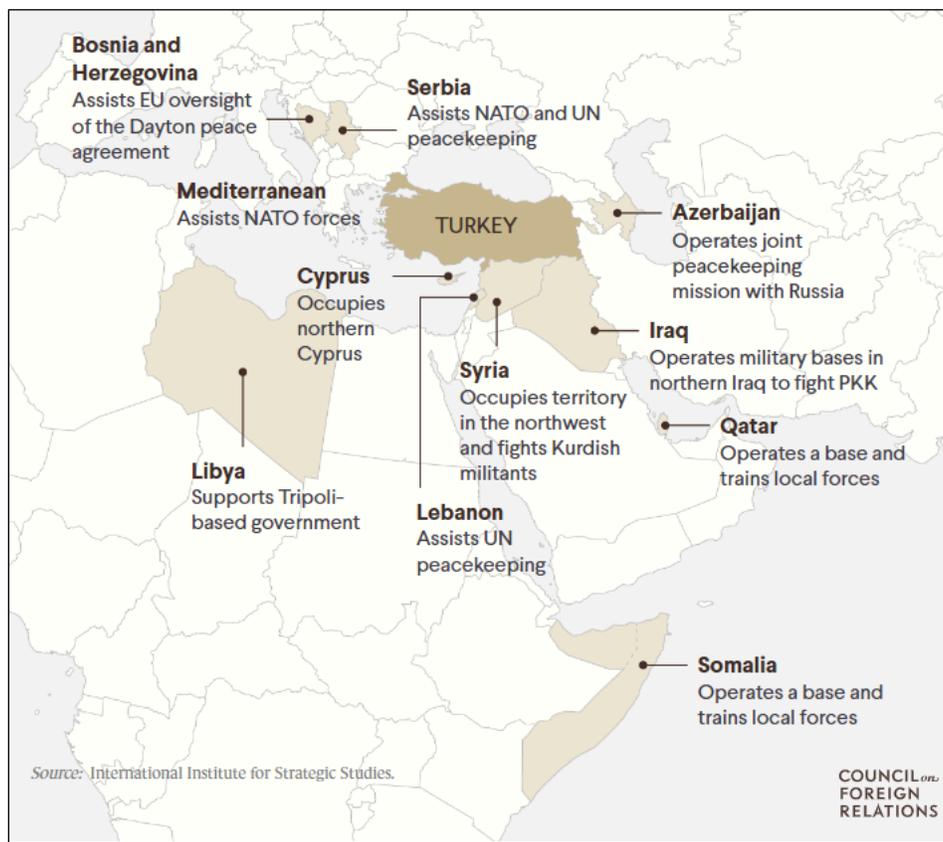
<sup>25</sup> Evren Balta, "Normalizing transactionalism: Turkish foreign policy after the 2023 elections," Middle East Institute, July 9, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Marc Pierini, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Ambitions Meet Reality," Carnegie Europe, September 12, 2024; Yusuf Can, "Turkey's Balancing Act: Navigating NATO, BRICS, and Other Global Partnerships," Wilson Center, July 11, 2024.

- continued expansion of Turkey’s arms industry and arms exports, including a renowned drone program;<sup>27</sup>
- attempts to broaden Turkish influence and strengthen ties with countries in various regions (such as Eastern Europe and the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, the Caucasus, and Central Asia);<sup>28</sup> and
- a mix of military, economic, and diplomatic means to maximize Turkish self-reliance, deter neighboring countries or groups that may present current or potential threats, and prevent active conflicts or political disputes near Turkey (such as in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Cyprus) from undermining Turkish national security or domestic stability (see **Figure 2**).<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 2. Turkey’s Military Presence**

(as of July 2023)



The following are some key foreign policy issues with relevance for U.S.-Turkey relations.

<sup>27</sup> Can Kasapoglu, “Drones and More: Turkish Defense Cooperation Trends in the Air,” *Defense Journal by Atlantic Council IN TURKEY*, Issue 3, June 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Sinem Adar, “Turkey’s Geostrategy: Opportunism and Dissonance,” *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, January 10, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Amnon Aran and Mustafa Kutlay, *Turkey’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy in an Era of Multipolarity*, Istanbul Policy Center (Sabanci University), February 2024.

## U.S./NATO Strategic Relationship and Military Presence

The United States has valued Turkey’s geopolitical importance to and military strength within the NATO alliance, while viewing Turkey’s NATO membership as helping anchor Turkey to the West. The State Department’s *Integrated Country Strategy* (ICS) for Turkey says that its sizable military (the second-largest in NATO) and its geographic location at the southeastern flank of the alliance give it a critical role in regional security.<sup>30</sup> Turkey’s proximity to conflict in the Middle East and Eurasia has made the continuing availability of its territory for the stationing and transport of arms, cargo, and personnel valuable for the United States and NATO. In addition to Incirlik Air Base near the southern Turkish city of Adana, other key U.S./NATO sites include an early warning missile defense radar in eastern Turkey and a NATO ground forces command in Izmir (see **Figure 3**). Turkey also controls access to and from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus (alt. Bosphorus) and Dardanelles Straits (the Straits).

**Figure 3. Map of U.S. and NATO Military Presence in Turkey**



**Sources:** Created by CRS using data gathered from the Department of Defense, NATO, and various media outlets since 2011.

**Note:** All locations are approximate.

For Turkey, NATO’s traditional importance has been to mitigate Turkish concerns about encroachment by neighbors, such as the Soviet Union’s aggressive post-World War II posturing leading up to the Cold War. Additionally, NATO security guarantees compensate Turkey for a general lack of nationally owned strategic defense and deterrence capabilities.<sup>31</sup> In more recent or

<sup>30</sup> State Department, *Integrated Country Strategy: Turkey*, May 13, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Can Kasapoglu, “Turkey,” *The Nations of NATO: Shaping the Alliance’s Relevance and Cohesion*, Thierry Tardy, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 97.

ongoing arenas of conflict like Ukraine and Syria, Turkey's possible interest in countering Russian objectives may be partly motivating Turkey's military operations and arms exports.<sup>32</sup>

Some of Turkey's actions in the 2020s have arguably undermined NATO's strength and unity. As discussed above, it delayed approving NATO accession for Sweden and Finland. Additionally, in 2020, Turkey delayed a NATO defense plan for Poland and the Baltic states, before ultimately agreeing to it. Turkey's hesitation on the Poland-Baltic defense plan was reportedly related to efforts to persuade other alliance members to distance themselves from PKK-linked Syrian Kurds that the Turkish government views as adversaries.<sup>33</sup>

Tensions between Turkey and other NATO members during the 2020s have fueled internal U.S./NATO discussions about the continued use of Turkish bases. Some reports suggest that expanded or potentially expanded U.S. military presences in places such as Greece, Cyprus, and Jordan might be connected with concerns about Turkey.<sup>34</sup> In March 2022 congressional hearing testimony, Turkey expert and former congressional committee staff member Alan Makovsky said that while the United States should make efforts to keep Turkey in the "Western camp," Turkish "equivocation in recent years" justifies the United States building and expanding military facilities in Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece to "hedge its bets."<sup>35</sup>

Turkey's eventual support for Swedish-Finnish NATO accession, and its willingness to join certain alliance initiatives that appear focused on deterring Russia, may counterbalance the possible tensions or cohesion issues mentioned above. In April 2024, Turkey suspended its obligations under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, joining other NATO allies who had previously taken this step.<sup>36</sup>

## Possible BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization Membership

As a sign that Turkey is willing to consider membership in international economic and security organizations that arguably position themselves as alternatives to Western-dominated organizations like the G7 and NATO, Turkish officials have sought to join the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, the People's Republic of China [PRC], South Africa) group and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Questions persist about whether and when Turkey might join either or both organizations, and if doing so would be a signal of greater alignment with Russia and the PRC, or of increased Turkish strategic autonomy and regional prominence. President Erdogan has said, "Turkey can become a strong, prosperous, prestigious and effective country if it improves its relations with the East and the West simultaneously."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Russia, Turkey and the Spectre of Regional Instability," *Al Sharq Strategic Research*, April 13, 2022; Mitch Prothero, "Turkey's Erdogan has been humiliating Putin all year," *Business Insider*, October 22, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> "NATO puts defence plan for Poland, Baltics into action, officials say," *Reuters*, July 2, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> "Pentagon pushes back on claim that US to leave Turkey's Incirlik base," *Al-Monitor*, September 16, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Prepared testimony of Alan Makovsky, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, "Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation," House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism; and Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, March 31, 2022, at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/opportunities-and-challenges-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-examining-u-s-interests-and-regional-cooperation/>.

<sup>36</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey Joins NATO Allies in Suspending Europe Arms Treaty," *Bloomberg*, April 5, 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, "Turkey Bids to Join BRICS in Push to Build Alliances Beyond West," *Bloomberg*, September 2, 2024.

An AKP spokesperson confirmed in September that Turkey has formally applied to join BRICS—which also includes Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Ethiopia.<sup>38</sup> In a September 2024 interview, the U.S. chargé d'affaires to Turkey said, “Neither I nor my government have an opinion on this matter [Turkey’s potential BRICS membership]. Turkey is a sovereign, independent state...it can establish ties with whomever it wants.”<sup>39</sup> In June, then-U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Jeff Flake expressed hope that Turkey would not join BRICS, but said such a move would not change Turkey’s alignment with the West.<sup>40</sup> Given that Turkey’s EU membership prospects appear dim,<sup>41</sup> and that little or no discernible progress has taken place on updating the Turkey-EU customs union, one observer has expressed that Turkey might seek to join BRICS in efforts to attract “more investment, new markets and a better legal system and investment ecosystem to break free from the ‘middle-income trap.’”<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, Erdogan has stated that Turkey wants to join the SCO.<sup>43</sup> The SCO is a multilateral organization covering political, economic, and security matters that includes Russia, the PRC, and most Central Asian countries, as well as India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus. The SCO is not a formal alliance like NATO.

## Potential F-16 Sale and Other Defense Procurement Issues

In January 2024, three days after Turkey’s parliament approved Sweden’s NATO accession, the Biden Administration formally notified Congress of a possible \$23 billion Foreign Military Sale (FMS) that would provide Turkey with 40 new F-16 Block 70 aircraft, “modernize 79 existing F-16 aircraft to V-Configuration,” and equip the aircraft with munitions.<sup>44</sup> (The Administration notified a possible \$8.6 billion FMS of 40 F-35 aircraft to Greece on the same day.<sup>45</sup>) After the prescribed Arms Export Control Act (AECA)-mandated review period has passed, Congress can use the regular legislative process to act at any time—up to the point of final delivery—to block, condition, or otherwise influence an arms sale.<sup>46</sup> On February 29, a motion to discharge a proposed joint resolution of disapproval (S.J.Res. 60) regarding the possible F-16 sale from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee failed in the Senate by a 13-79 vote.<sup>47</sup> In June, the State Department announced that Turkey had signed a letter of offer and acceptance to purchase the F-16s.<sup>48</sup> In July, one source reported that Turkey is seeking to reduce how many F-16s it modernizes

<sup>38</sup> Ezgi Akin, “Turkey, NATO member, submits formal application to join BRICS,” *Al-Monitor*, September 3, 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Didem Ozel Tumer, “‘Tam anlamiyla dehset verici,’” *Milliyet*, September 15, 2024.

<sup>40</sup> “Turkey is anchored in the West despite split on Gaza, US envoy says,” Reuters, June 12, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> For more on Turkey-EU relations, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

<sup>42</sup> Barin Kayaoglu, “Turkey’s BRICS ambitions hinge on India, China accepting Ankara’s bid,” *Al-Monitor*, September 8, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, “NATO Ally Turkey Seeks Membership in China-Led SCO, Erdogan Says,” Bloomberg, July 5, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Türkiye – F-16 Aircraft Acquisition and Modernization,” Transmittal No. 23-07, January 26, 2024. For additional background on the possible sale and congressional views, see CRS Report R47493, *Turkey (Türkiye): Possible U.S. Sale of F-16 Aircraft*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

<sup>45</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Greece – F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Conventional Take Off and Landing (CTOL) Aircraft,” Transmittal No. 23-01, January 26, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> CRS In Focus IF11533, *Modifying or Ending Sales of U.S.-Origin Defense Articles*, by Paul K. Kerr and Liana W. Rosen.

<sup>47</sup> For the roll call, see [https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_votes/vote1182/vote\\_118\\_2\\_00062.htm](https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1182/vote_118_2_00062.htm). See also Bryant Harris, “Turkey F-16 sale to proceed after Senate vote,” *Defense News*, February 29, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> State Department Press Briefing, June 6, 2024.

and how many munitions it buys under the deal “amid spending cuts at home,” and also wants an offset agreement to produce some aircraft parts domestically.<sup>49</sup>

After Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Turkey’s strategic and military significance for NATO amid an evolving European security crisis may have contributed to the Administration decision to advance the F-16 transaction. Turkey uses F-16s in NATO missions based in the Baltic and Mediterranean Sea regions.<sup>50</sup>

The advancement of the F-16 sale has prompted some renewed attention in bilateral relations to the issue of Turkey’s potential acquisition of F-35s. Turkey was an original member of the U.S.-led F-35 consortium, but was removed in July 2019 due to its procurement of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense system.<sup>51</sup> Factors that may have influenced Turkey’s S-400 acquisition include a desire to diversify Turkey’s foreign arms sources, Turkey’s interest in future technology sharing and coproduction arrangements to bolster its domestic arms defense industry, and potentially defending against U.S.-origin aircraft such as those used in the 2016 coup attempt.<sup>52</sup> Turkey’s S-400 acquisition also led to the Trump Administration imposing some sanctions in December 2020 on a Turkish defense procurement agency and associated officials for their role in the transaction, under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>53</sup> During a January 2024 visit to Turkey, then-Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland was quoted as saying, “If we can get through this issue, then the CAATSA issue will go away, and we can get back into an F-35 conversation.”<sup>54</sup> Despite this overture, Turkish officials have indicated that they intend to keep the S-400.<sup>55</sup> The FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 116-92) includes a provision (Section 1245) prohibiting the Defense Department from transferring F-35s to Turkey unless Turkey no longer possesses the S-400. Turkish officials have reportedly placed the S-400 in a storage facility rather than activating it and risking additional U.S. retaliatory measures.<sup>56</sup>

Turkish officials have reportedly expressed interest in acquiring 40 Eurofighter Typhoon fighter aircraft, in addition to the F-16s.<sup>57</sup> In doing so, Turkey would follow a practice that several other U.S. partners in its region—including Greece and a number of Arab states—have established in diversifying their Western suppliers of combat aircraft.<sup>58</sup> Turkey also is moving forward with

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<sup>49</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, “Turkey to Pare Back \$23 Billion Deal for F-16 Jets with US,” Bloomberg, July 12, 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.; “U.S. Relations with Turkey (Türkiye),” Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, January 9, 2023; Gareth Jennings, “Turkey joins NATO Baltic Air Policing for first time since 2006,” *Janes Defence Weekly*, July 7, 2021; NATO Allied Air Command, “Turkish E-7T Provides Airborne Command and Control for Exercise Ramstein Alloy,” April 14, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> CRS Report R47493, *Turkey (Türkiye): Possible U.S. Sale of F-16 Aircraft*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

<sup>52</sup> Aaron Stein, “Putin’s Victory: Why Turkey and America Made Each Other Weaker,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 29, 2019; “Turkey is buying Russian missiles to diversify supply,” *Oxford Analytica*, January 26, 2018; Nicholas Danforth, “Frustration, Fear, and the Fate of U.S.-Turkish Relations,” German Marshall Fund of the United States, July 19, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, “US Open to Turkey F-35 Talks if Dispute over Russian Air Defenses Is Resolved,” Bloomberg, January 30, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Iddon, “Greece and Turkey’s Strategic Russian Air Defense Missiles Briefly in Spotlight,” *Forbes*, February 15, 2024; Selcan Hacaoglu, “Turkey Signals Preference to Retain Russian S-400s in F-35 Row,” Bloomberg, February 4, 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Abdullah Bozkurt, “Turkey put Russian S-400 missiles in a storage facility to avoid further clashes with the US,” *Nordic Monitor*, December 8, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Barin Kayaoglu, “Can warmer Germany-Turkey ties bring Ankara Eurofighters along with Airbuses?” *Al-Monitor*, May 5, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Iddon, “Turkey Questions the Wisdom of Having an All-American Air Force,” *Forbes*, February 6, 2023.

efforts to build a domestically produced fighter with some stealth capabilities, but mass production would reportedly—according to some estimates—begin at earliest in the mid-2030s.<sup>59</sup>

## Russia and Ukraine

Turkey's relations with Russia feature elements of cooperation and competition. Turkey has made a number of foreign policy moves since 2016 toward closer ties with Russia. A combination of factors may have motivated these decisions, including Turkey's apparent desire to reduce dependence on the West in certain security matters, economic opportunism, and chances to increase its regional influence. Turkey retains significant differences with Russia, with which it has a long history of discord, and has pursued closer ties to a number of countries surrounding Russia (including Ukraine and Poland)—likely in part as a counterweight to Russian regional power.<sup>60</sup> Turkey continues to rely on Russia for around 40% of its natural gas imports,<sup>61</sup> but Turkey's other domestic and foreign supply options—including some U.S. sources—may gradually reduce this dependence.<sup>62</sup>

### Turkey-Ukraine Defense Cooperation

Turkey and Ukraine have strengthened their relations since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. In 2017, a Turkish security analyst attributed these closer ties to growing mutual interests in countering Russian influence in the Black Sea region and in sharing military technology to expand and increase the self-sufficiency of their respective defense industries.<sup>63</sup> Since 2020, the two countries have signed multiple agreements signifying closer cooperation, including a 2022 free trade agreement that came into force in August 2024.<sup>64</sup>

In line with these agreements, Turkish and Ukrainian companies have engaged in or planned a significant expansion of defense transactions, including a number of joint development or co-production initiatives.<sup>65</sup> Turkish expertise with drone and other aircraft and naval platforms complements Ukrainian skills in designing and constructing aerospace engines and missiles.<sup>66</sup> As part of the deepening bilateral defense cooperation, Turkey has sold several Turkish-origin armed drones to Ukraine since 2019,<sup>67</sup> and Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar Technology has started building a factory in Ukraine to produce some drone models.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Turkey is helping establish Ukraine's naval capabilities by producing corvettes (small warships) for export.<sup>69</sup>

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has heightened challenges Turkey faces in balancing its relations with the two countries, with implications for U.S.-Turkey ties. Turkey's links with

<sup>59</sup> Sebastien Roblin, "Turkey's Very First Fighter Jet Made Its History-Shattering Flight," *Popular Mechanics*, February 29, 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Can Kasapoglu, "Turkish Drone Strategy in the Black Sea Region and Beyond," Jamestown Foundation, October 12, 2022; Jeffrey Mankoff, "As Russia Reels, Eurasia Roils," *War on the Rocks*, October 11, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Megan Byrne and James Cockayne, "Turkey Gas Imports: Russia Still Dominant," *MEES*, March 3, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Francesco Siccardi, "Understanding the Energy Drivers of Turkey's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Europe, February 28, 2024; Jennifer Gnana, "Shell, Turkey's BOTAS sign 10-year LNG deal amid diversification plans," *Al-Monitor*, September 2, 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Metin Gurcan, "Turkey-Ukraine defense industry ties are booming," *Al-Monitor*, May 1, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> "Free trade agreement between Turkey and Ukraine comes into force," *Platts*, August 5, 2024.

<sup>65</sup> Kasapoglu, "Turkish Drone Strategy in the Black Sea Region and Beyond"; Pinar Dost, "The Ukraine-Turkey defense partnership with the potential to transform Black Sea and Euro-Atlantic security," Atlantic Council, March 5, 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Kasapoglu, "Turkish Drone Strategy in the Black Sea Region and Beyond."

<sup>67</sup> Dorian Jones, "Turkey Strengthens Defense Industry with Its Ukraine Partnership," *Voice of America*, February 4, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> "Turkey's drone maker Baykar begins to build plant in Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 7, 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Kate Tringham, "Update: Turkey launches first Ada-class corvette for Ukraine and cuts steel for second," *Janes Navy International*, October 3, 2022.

Russia—especially its 2019 acquisition of the Russian S-400 system—have fueled major U.S.-Turkey tensions and triggered sanctions. However, following Russia’s invasion, U.S. and Turkish interests in countering Russian revisionist aims—including along the Black Sea coast—appear to have converged in some ways as Turkey has helped strengthen Ukraine’s defense capabilities in parallel with other NATO countries. In addition to denouncing Russia’s invasion, Turkey has closed the Straits to belligerent warships, opposed Russian claims to Ukrainian territory (including Crimea), and served as a transit hub for natural gas to Europe.<sup>70</sup> Turkey also has supplied Ukraine with various types of military equipment—including armed drone aircraft and mine-resistant ambush-resistant (MRAP) vehicles<sup>71</sup>—as well as humanitarian assistance. In March 2024, a media source, citing unnamed officials, reported that the Defense Department has purchased sizable amounts of ammunition for delivery to Ukraine from a Turkish supplier, and that another Turkish contractor is expected to produce some 30% of U.S.-made 155mm artillery shells at a Texas facility by 2025, as part of efforts to continue assisting Ukraine despite strain on supply chains.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, Turkish officials and their Ukrainian counterparts signed an agreement for a “Turkish-Ukrainian Reconstruction Task Force” in January 2024.<sup>73</sup>

Turkey’s proximity to and ties with both Russia and Ukraine, and its ability to regulate access to the Straits, have put it in a position to mediate between the parties on various issues of contention. In July 2022, Turkey and the United Nations entered into parallel agreements with Russia and Ukraine to provide a Black Sea corridor for Ukrainian grain exports that partly alleviated global supply concerns.<sup>74</sup> The arrangement lapsed in July 2023.<sup>75</sup> Since then, Ukraine has established an alternative grain corridor that traverses the territorial waters of Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey by hugging their coastlines, thus facilitating Ukrainian grain export levels unseen since before Russia’s 2022 invasion.<sup>76</sup> Turkey has proposed establishing a new mechanism for Russia-Ukraine agreement on safe passage for grain exports through the Black Sea and the Straits.<sup>77</sup>

Turkish officials have sought to minimize any negative economic impact Turkey might face from the Russia-Ukraine war, partly through boosting various forms of economic and energy cooperation with Russia. The Turkish government has not joined Western economic sanctions against Russia or closed its airspace to Russian civilian flights. Russia’s Rosatom has jointly built Turkey’s first nuclear power plant, but the company’s director general claimed in July 2024 that U.S. sanctions on Russia have delayed the plant from becoming operational.<sup>78</sup> Turkish officials

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<sup>70</sup> State Department, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability,” February 20, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Burak Ege Bekdil, “Turkey sends 50 mine-resistant vehicles to Ukraine, with more expected,” *Defense News*, August 22, 2022; Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, “The Stalwart Ally: Türkiye’s Arms Deliveries to Ukraine,” *Oryx*, November 21, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Natalia Drozdiak et al., “US Turns to Turkey for Explosives as War in Ukraine Saps Supply,” *Bloomberg*, March 27, 2024.

<sup>73</sup> “Turkey, Ukraine sign document allowing Turkish firms to help Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction,” *Reuters*, January 31, 2024.

<sup>74</sup> “Ukraine, Russia agree to export grain, ending a standoff that threatened food supply,” *Associated Press*, July 22, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> For background on Russian demands, see “Explainer: Have Western sanctions on Russia impacted its fertiliser exports?” *Reuters*, May 11, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Noah Berman and Mariel Ferragamo, “How Ukraine Overcame Russia’s Grain Blockade,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 27, 2024.

<sup>77</sup> Ragıp Soylu, “Why Russia may finally accept Turkey’s plans for Black Sea shipping,” *Middle East Eye*, March 6, 2024, at <https://mailchi.mp/middleeasteye/why-russia-may-finally-accept-turkeys-plans-for-black-sea-shipping?e=b82e8edad4>.

<sup>78</sup> Brendan Cole, “Putin’s Nuclear Project Inside NATO Country Dealt a Blow,” *Newsweek*, July 8, 2024.

are reportedly talking to counterparts from the United States, Russia, China, and South Korea about possibly partnering on future nuclear power projects.<sup>79</sup>

Some of Turkey's Russia-related dealings could potentially lead to Western secondary sanctions against Turkey for facilitating Russian sanctions evasion. Turkey has said it does not consider itself bound by other countries' sanctions against Russia, but that it would prevent the use of its jurisdiction to evade sanctions. After reports surfaced in early 2023 about the possibility that Turkish businesses might have been exporting electronic or technological products with potential defense applications to Russia,<sup>80</sup> Turkey supposedly began to enforce curbs on sanctioned goods transiting its territory to Russia.<sup>81</sup> However, the Treasury Department has subsequently placed sanctions on some Turkey-based companies and individuals for assisting Russia or Russian entities.<sup>82</sup> The *Financial Times* reported in November 2023, "In the first nine months of 2023, Turkey reported \$158mn of exports of 45 goods the US lists as 'high-priority' to Russia and five former Soviet countries suspected of acting as intermediaries for Moscow [including microchips, communications equipment, and telescopic sights]. That was three times the level recorded over the same period in 2022, when the war in Ukraine began."<sup>83</sup>

In December 2023, President Joe Biden issued an executive order aimed at strengthening "U.S. sanctions authorities against financial facilitators of Russia's war machine."<sup>84</sup> Facing the possibility of secondary sanctions, Turkish banks appear to have been responsive, reportedly cutting ties with most of their Russian counterparts (with the supposed exception of foreign subsidiary banks in Russia).<sup>85</sup> Turkish efforts to comply with the executive order also have reportedly affected some Turkish payments for Russian oil imports and Russian payments for a broader range of Turkish exports.<sup>86</sup> During 2024, the Administration has placed additional sanctions on some Turkish entities (as well as on individuals and entities from several other countries) alleged to have engaged in sanctions evasion and/or circumvention.<sup>87</sup>

## Israel and the Palestinians (including Hamas)

Since Hamas led attacks into Israel on October 7, 2023, and war ensued, Turkey-Israel ties have come under strain. Turkey and Erdogan had been improving relations with Israel prior to October

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<sup>79</sup> "Turkey, US in talks on nuclear plant projects, Turkish official says," Reuters, July 2, 2024.

<sup>80</sup> State Department, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at a Joint Press Availability."

<sup>81</sup> "Turkey Blocks Transit of Goods Sanctioned by EU, US to Russia," *Bloomberg*, March 10, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Department of the Treasury, "U.S. Continues to Degrade Russia's Military-Industrial Base and Target Third-Country Support with Nearly 300 New Sanctions," May 1, 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Adam Samson et al., "Turkey's exports of military-linked goods to Russia soar," *Financial Times*, November 27, 2023.

<sup>84</sup> White House, "FACT SHEET: Biden Administration Expands U.S. Sanctions Authorities to Target Financial Facilitators of Russia's War Machine," December 22, 2023; "Executive Order 14114 of December 22, 2023: Taking Additional Steps with Respect to the Russian Federation's Harmful Activities," *Federal Register*, Vol. 88, No. 246, December 26, 2023, pp. 89271-89274.

<sup>85</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Closer Ties to the West Don't Mean Turkey Will Give Up on Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Carnegie), February 7, 2024.

<sup>86</sup> "Exclusive: Turkish-Russian trade hit by fresh US sanctions threat," Reuters, February 19, 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Department of the Treasury, "Russia-related Designations; Issuance of Russia-related General Licenses and new and amended Frequently Asked Questions," February 23, 2024; "As Russia Completes Transition to a Full War Economy, Treasury Takes Sweeping Aim at Foundational Financial Infrastructure and Access to Third Country Support," June 12, 2024.

7, and Turkey had said that the countries were contemplating closer energy cooperation.<sup>88</sup> Tension between Turkey and Israel on Palestinian issues flared up previously on a number of previous occasions, including in 2010 when Israeli commandos killed ten Turkish citizens in clashes aboard the *Mavi Marmara*, part of a private Turkish flotilla seeking to provide relief supplies to the Gaza Strip despite Israeli maritime restrictions. Despite maintaining diplomatic relations to date, Turkey and Israel may face challenges in restoring bilateral ties to their pre-October 7 status.<sup>89</sup> Israel withdrew its diplomats from Turkey in October 2023, and Turkey withdrew its ambassador from Israel in November.<sup>90</sup>

President Erdogan has strongly criticized Israel for its military actions in Gaza impacting Palestinian civilians, calling it a “terror state” and labeling Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the “butcher of Gaza” (and also comparing him to Hitler).<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Erdogan has criticized the U.S. role in the conflict, saying in April 2024 that U.S. “unconditional military and diplomatic support” for Israel is “making the problem bigger.”<sup>92</sup> While in Washington, DC for a NATO summit in July, Erdogan said that the Biden Administration was complicit in “Israeli war crimes and violations of international law,” called for sanctions against Israel, and said that Turkey would not approve NATO cooperation measures with Israel until “comprehensive, sustainable peace is established in Palestine.”<sup>93</sup> Some Members of Congress have expressed concern about Erdogan’s “escalating hostility and inflammatory rhetoric toward Israel,” and urged the Administration to tell Erdogan that continued Turkish support for Hamas would harm U.S.-Turkey relations.<sup>94</sup>

Erdogan’s escalation from rhetorical criticism to specific policy measures against Israel—including a general suspension of trade in May (see text box “Turkish Suspension of Trade with Israel”)—may be partly due to the success of an Islamist political party in peeling voters from Erdogan’s AKP in Turkey’s March 2024 local elections.<sup>95</sup> In August 2024, Turkey applied to join South Africa as a co-plaintiff in the case South Africa has brought in the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza.<sup>96</sup> In response to the September 2024 death of a Turkish-American activist in the West Bank—likely from Israeli military gunfire—Turkish prosecutors have opened a criminal investigation and Turkish leaders have said they will share information with various international courts and organizations.<sup>97</sup>

### Turkish Suspension of Trade with Israel

<sup>88</sup> “Erdogan says Turkey, Israel to take steps in energy drilling soon, media report,” Reuters, September 21, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> Burak Ünveren, “Israel-Hamas war strains ties with Turkey,” Deutsche Welle, November 4, 2023.

<sup>90</sup> The countries’ ambassadors had arrived at their respective posts less than a year before, in December 2022, after having previously withdrawn on a reciprocal basis in 2018.

<sup>91</sup> “Turkey’s Erdogan says Israeli PM Netanyahu no different from Hitler,” Reuters, December 27, 2023; “Turkey’s Erdogan calls Netanyahu ‘butcher of Gaza,’” Agence France Presse, November 29, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Amberin Zaman, “Turkey postpones Erdogan White House visit,” *Al-Monitor*, April 26, 2024.

<sup>93</sup> “Erdogan says Biden, U.S. complicit in alleged Israeli war crimes,” and “Erdogan says Turkey will not approve NATO attempts to cooperate with Israel,” Reuters, July 11, 2024.

<sup>94</sup> Letter from 28 Representatives to Secretary of State Blinken dated July 9, 2024, at <https://d12t4t5x3vyizu.cloudfront.net/gottheimer.house.gov/uploads/2024/07/Erdogan-Letter.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Soner Cagaptay, “Will Turkey Cut Ties with Israel?” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 8, 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Suzan Fraser, “Turkey formally asks to join the genocide case against Israel at the UN court,” Associated Press, August 7, 2024.

<sup>97</sup> Ezgi Akin, “What Turkey’s legal campaign against Israel over slain activist entails,” *Al-Monitor*, September 18, 2024.

Tension over the ongoing war is affecting Turkey-Israel trade. In April, the Turkish trade ministry announced export restrictions on 54 product groups—mostly construction materials and jet fuel—to last until a cease-fire is declared.<sup>98</sup> Israel's foreign minister pledged to implement parallel measures against Turkey. Some Members of Congress suggested responsive U.S. measures against Turkey in support of Israel.<sup>99</sup>

Then in May, Turkey's trade ministry announced that Turkey had stopped all import and export transactions with Israel "until a permanent ceasefire is achieved (in Gaza) and humanitarian aid is allowed without interruption."<sup>100</sup> As of September, it is unclear to what extent indirect Turkey-Israel trade via other countries might continue, after the end of a reported three-month phase-out period to allow some companies to "fulfill existing orders via third countries."<sup>101</sup> An Israeli source asserts that some bilateral trade may continue through a loophole permitting Palestinians to place orders with Turkish businesses and direct shipments to Israel.<sup>102</sup> For 2023, trade amounted to \$5.4 billion in Turkish exports and \$1.6 billion in Israeli imports.<sup>103</sup> Israel reportedly has normally received around 40% of its oil from Azerbaijan via Turkey; these shipments reportedly continue.<sup>104</sup>

Israel's foreign minister argued that Turkey's suspension of trade contravenes existing agreements; a Turkey-Israel free trade agreement has been effective since 1997.<sup>105</sup> In May, Israel's finance minister reportedly proposed to retaliate by suspending the free trade agreement and imposing a 100% tariff on all Turkish imports during the remainder of Erdogan's presidency—measures that would be subject to the approval of Israel's cabinet.<sup>106</sup>

During Erdogan's time as prime minister and president, Turkey has provided political support to Hamas (which President Erdogan has defended as "a liberation group"),<sup>107</sup> and Turkish officials have hosted Hamas political officials from time to time.<sup>108</sup> Some media outlets have presented allegations that Turkey-based or -linked private entities have provided substantial material support to Hamas.<sup>109</sup> A Treasury Department official visited Turkey in November 2023 and raised concern about Hamas's ability to operate in Turkey to fund potential future attacks; Turkish officials reportedly responded that while they do not consider Hamas to be a terrorist group, Turkey "would not tolerate violations of domestic laws including money laundering and direct

<sup>98</sup> Ezgi Akin and Rina Bassist, "Turkey restricts exports of 54 products to Israel until Gaza cease-fire," *Al-Monitor*, April 9, 2024.

<sup>99</sup> Jacobs et al., "U.S. lawmakers call for possible sanctions against Turkey in response to new trade restrictions against Israel."

<sup>100</sup> "Turkey says Israel trade halted until permanent Gaza ceasefire," Reuters, May 3, 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Ezgi Akin and Rina Bassist, "Turkey, Israel tangle in fresh row over trade ban," *Al-Monitor*, May 9, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Dean Shmuel Elmas, "Turkish exports to 'Palestine' skyrocket," *Globes*, August 7, 2024.

<sup>103</sup> "Turkey says Israel trade halted until permanent Gaza ceasefire," Reuters, May 3, 2024.

<sup>104</sup> Ragip Soylu, "Does Turkey have a duty to turn off the taps on oil supplies to Israel?" *Middle East Eye*, September 6, 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Adam Samson and James Shotter, "Turkey halts trade with Israel over Gaza conflict," *Financial Times*, May 2, 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Rina Bassist, "Israel's Smotrich will abolish free trade deal with Turkey, slap 100% tariff," *Al-Monitor*, May 16, 2024.

<sup>107</sup> "Turkey's Erdogan says Hamas is not terrorist organisation, cancels trip to Israel," Reuters, October 25, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş and Kevin Huggard, "Understanding Turkey's response to the Israel-Gaza crisis," Brookings Institution, December 7, 2023. An Israeli media source has reported, "While the country [Turkey] insisted that it only hosted the group's political wing, in 2020, Israel provided Turkish intelligence with evidence that members of Hamas's military wing operate in the office [that hosts Hamas political leaders], under the supervision of Beirut-based Saleh al-Aroui, who was killed in an alleged Israeli strike in Lebanon in January." "Erdogan says Turkey 'firmly' backs terror group Hamas, compares Netanyahu to Hitler," *Times of Israel*, March 9, 2024.

<sup>109</sup> Jo Becker and Justine Scheck, "Israel Found the Hamas Money Machine Years Ago. Nobody Turned It Off," *New York Times*, December 16, 2023; Rory Jones et al., "Hamas 'CEO' Keeps Group Funded from Base in Turkey," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2024.

funding of violent acts.”<sup>110</sup> Since October 2023, Treasury has imposed sanctions on several Turkey-based Hamas operatives or Hamas-linked companies.<sup>111</sup>

Erdogan may hope to use Turkey’s good relations with Hamas to help reconcile it with its domestic rival, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), potentially boosting Turkey’s role in shaping potential Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic outcomes.<sup>112</sup> In August 2024, Erdogan hosted PLO Chairman and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Turkey. Abbas gave an address to the Turkish parliament during his visit, calling for international legal measures against Israel and pledging to visit Gaza and Jerusalem.<sup>113</sup>

During 2024, Turkey has arrested several people on suspicion of espionage for Israel’s Mossad, at least some apparently in connection with the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>114</sup> Erdogan has warned of “serious consequences” if Israel were to assassinate Hamas members on Turkish soil.<sup>115</sup>

## Syria<sup>116</sup>

Turkey’s involvement in Syria since civil conflict broke out there in 2011 has been complicated and costly, and has severely strained U.S.-Turkey ties. Turkey’s priorities in Syria have evolved: while Turkey still opposes Syrian President Bashar al Asad, it has engaged in a mix of coordination and competition with him and his main supporters Russia and Iran since Turkey initiated military action against Syrian Kurdish forces in August 2016. Three significant Turkish military operations (in 2016, 2018, and 2019) have left Turkey, in cooperation with Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups, in effective control of large swaths of northern Syria and created tensions with U.S. forces operating in the country (see **Figure 4**).

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<sup>110</sup> “U.S. presses sceptical Turkey to curb Hamas fundraising,” Reuters, November 30, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Department of the Treasury, “U.S. and UK Target Additional Hamas Finance Officials and Representatives,” December 13, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Barin Kayaoglu, “As Qatar’s frustrations grow, can Turkey lead Gaza diplomacy between Hamas, Israel?” *Al-Monitor*, April 21, 2024.

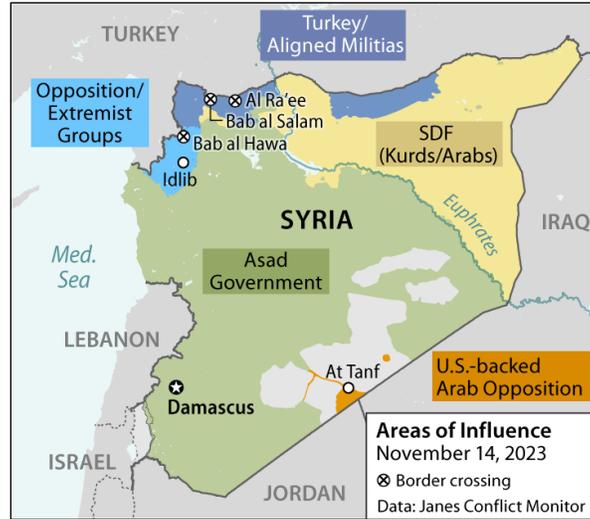
<sup>113</sup> “Palestinian leader Abbas tells Turkish parliament he will visit Gaza, Jerusalem,” Reuters, August 15, 2024.

<sup>114</sup> Ezgi Akin, “Turkey arrests alleged Mossad operative running money network,” *Al-Monitor*, September 3, 2024; “Turkey detains 7 more people for allegedly selling information to Israel’s spy agency,” Associated Press, March 5, 2024; “Seven detained in Turkey for allegedly selling information to Israel’s Mossad spy agency,” Associated Press, February 2, 2024.

<sup>115</sup> “Seven detained in Turkey,” Associated Press.

<sup>116</sup> See CRS In Focus IF11930, *Syria and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

**Figure 4. Syria Conflict Map**



**Source:** CRS, using ESRI and U.S. State Department data.

Turkish military operations in Syria are largely focused on the Syrian Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG). The YPG is linked with the PKK,<sup>117</sup> and has a leading role within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella group including Arabs and other non-Kurdish elements that has been the main U.S. ground force partner against the Islamic State since 2015. Turkey has actively sought to thwart the YPG from establishing an autonomous area along Syria’s northern border with Turkey, likely reflecting concerns that YPG gains have bolstered the PKK in its domestic conflict with Turkish authorities.<sup>118</sup> President Erdogan has threatened additional military ground operations in Syria amid continued cross-border and air strikes.

Looking ahead, Turkish priorities regarding Syria appear to focus on minimizing cross-border risk. Turkish attacks in northern Syria intensified after an October 2023 suicide bombing claimed by the PKK near a government building in Ankara.<sup>119</sup> According to some reports, these attacks have caused severe damage to infrastructure in certain SDF-controlled areas of northeastern Syria. Turkey has taken some limited steps toward rapprochement with the Asad government—motivated at least in part by Turkey’s interest in the potential return of some of the four million Syrian refugees living in Turkey—but significant obstacles remain.<sup>120</sup> While the Biden Administration has reportedly reviewed U.S. policy in Syria (where attacks by Iran-backed

<sup>117</sup> Sources citing links between the PKK and YPG (or PKK affiliates in Syria) include State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2022*, Syria; Berkay Mandiraci, “Turkey’s PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux,” International Crisis Group, February 18, 2022; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Statement for the Record, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” February 13, 2018.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Soner Cagaptay, “U.S. Safe Zone Deal Can Help Turkey Come to Terms with the PKK and YPG,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 7, 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Samer al Ahmed and Mohammed Hassan, “Turkish escalation in northeastern Syria amid changes in military strategy,” Middle East Institute, October 11, 2023; Amberin Zaman, “Syria’s Kurds face ISIS threat, US indifference as Turkey destroys critical infrastructure,” *Al-Monitor*, April 18, 2024.

<sup>120</sup> Omar al-Radad, “A New Era for Turkish-Syrian Ties?” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 16, 2024.

groups against U.S. troops increased dramatically after October 2023),<sup>121</sup> Turkish military operations have continued against the YPG in northern Syria and the PKK in northern Iraq.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Pentagon floats plan for its Syrian Kurd allies to partner with Assad against ISIS," January 22, 2024.

<sup>122</sup> Steven Ganot, "Turkish Military Targets PKK and YPG in Cross-Border Strikes," *The Media Line*, September 2, 2024.