

# **Why Isn't Turkey Balancing Iran?: Explaining Balance-of-Power and Alliance Behavior in Response to Nuclear Proliferation**

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In the face of a rising Iran in pursuit of nuclear weapons, the United States and its Western allies are puzzled by why Turkey does not appear to be balancing the Iranian threat alongside its regional peers as contemporary international relations (IR) theory would predict. This paper seeks to explain the Turkish state's behavior—specifically its absence of balancing behavior. After identifying the weaknesses of contemporary explanations that rely too heavily on cultural or ideological (religious) variables, a number of rationalist theories from the IR literature on balance-of-power and alliance behavior are probed to explain the absence of Turkish balancing. The paper concludes that divergent threat prioritizations and collective actions problem at the international and domestic levels produce a range of potential reasons that can plausibly account for Turkey's recent behavior, though these sets of theories need to be more rigorously tested against each other for more conclusive results.

## **Introduction**

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Turkey has long been a critical ally of the United States but Turkey's reticence to fully cooperate in opposing the Iranian nuclear program has raised concerns that Turkey may be turning away from the Western fold. As Iran's rise appears to be altering the regional balance of power and threat by expanding its capabilities while pursuing a potential nuclear weapon, the United States and a number of its Middle East allies have moved to balance and contain Iran. However, Turkey appears to be pursuing a course orthogonal to its regional peers and is perceived as disregarding if not hampering U.S. and other states' strategy towards Iran.

The puzzle faced by many analysts today is this: Why isn't Turkey balancing Iran as conventional expectations predict? Moreover, what might possibly explain the Turkish state's recent behavior? Prevailing efforts to answer these questions have drawn on culture and religious ideology to explain the seemingly dramatic shift in Turkish behavior and alignment. But finding these efforts to be lacking, this paper turns to the literature from international relations (IR) on balance-of-power theory and alliance politics behavior to provide some rationalist explanations for the Turkish state.

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The first section analyzes recent trends in rising Iranian power and regional responses. Second, the paper reviews the background of the U.S.-Turkish relationship and the perceived shift in relations, particularly with regards to Iran. Third, some of the prevailing “popular” explanations of Iranian behavior relying on culturalist or ideological variables are evaluated. Finding these explanations wanting, the fourth section turns to the IR alliance literature for system- and domestic-level rationalist theories of what may drive state behavior and account for the absence of balancing. Finally the fifth section concludes with some findings along with the theoretical and policy relevance of the paper.

## **The Shifting Balance of Power**

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Iran by all objective measures appears on the rise as a regional power in the Middle East. Despite an expanded U.S. presence in the region, over the past decade Iran’s main regional threats—Saddam’s Iraq and the Taliban’s Afghanistan—have been neutralized while its influence has spread.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Iran has been engaged in a gradual arms buildup for itself and its various militia proxies and allies,<sup>3</sup> offensive naval buildup and exercises,<sup>4</sup> and increased acquisition of short-range ballistic missiles over the past two decades,<sup>5</sup> and development of missile technology.<sup>6</sup> This is all in addition to Iran’s uranium enrichment activity that is declared for civilian uses but clearly can be used for a nuclear weapon, which could decisively tip the balance of power in the region.

Iran’s rise appears to be altering the balance of threat for two reasons. First, Iran is perceived to be behind a variety of belligerent or destabilizing activities, particularly through its asymmetric proxies that it backs like Shia militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. For example, currently Iran is building up the strength and stepping up training of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in asymmetric and guerilla warfare, which could be perceived as offensive maneuvers to destabilize the region even if they are defensively motivated.<sup>7</sup> Second, its military institutions, specifically the IRGC, appear to increasingly dominate the regime and wield more influence than civilian

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Takeyh, “Time for Détente with Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Joby Warrick, “Arms Smuggling Heightens Iran Fears,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Erdbink, “In Responding to West, Iran Stresses its Naval Abilities in Persian Gulf,” *Washington Post*, July 6, 2010; “US Navy Expands 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet’s Gulf Base,” *United Press International*, June 8, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Miranda Priebe and Joshua Shifrinson, “How Secure is Saudi Oil? An Analysis of a Worst-Case Attack on Saudi Oil Infrastructure,” Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, New Orleans, February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Uzi Rubin, “New Developments in Iran’s Missile Capabilities: Implications Beyond the Middle East,” *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, 9, no. 7 (August 25, 2009)  
<http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=442&PID=0&IID=3074>; Anna Newby, “A Talk by Missile Expert Uzi Rubin,” CSIS PoniBlogger’s Blog, June 16, 2010,

<http://csis.org/blog/talk-israeli-missile-expert-uzi-rubin>

<sup>7</sup> Cordesman, Anthony and Martin Kleiber, *Iran’s Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Treat in the Northern Gulf*, Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007. p. 20, 75.

institutions.<sup>8</sup> Coupling the fact that military organizations in general prefer the offensive<sup>9</sup> with the particularly zealous ideology of the IRGC since its origins provides significant cause for concern for its neighbors. By all counts, Iran is certainly rising in strength and capabilities and is perceived to be a threat to a number of states in the region.

### *Regional Responses*

As a result of Iran's rising capabilities and increasingly threatening nature, many states in the Middle East, particularly Israel and the Gulf region, have begun balancing Iran.<sup>10</sup> This includes internal and external means. Israel has long been concerned with Iranian military and nuclear buildup and participated in U.S. efforts to contain Iran's rise and influence. Recently it has engaged in visible political and military balancing behavior including airstrikes on Syria in 2007 and military exercises meant to demonstrate Israel's capability to strike Iran.<sup>11</sup>

The Gulf States<sup>12</sup> have expressed deep concerns about Iran's rise—both at the official level and amongst the elite strategic community<sup>13</sup>—and have sought to reduce their vulnerability to potential Iranian aggression, strikes, or efforts to incite the Shia minority populations. U.S.-supported balancing has come in two forms: internal arms buildups, and external alliance overtures facilitated by the United States including an unprecedented degree of Gulf air defense coordination, joint exercises with Arab militaries, and provision of missile defenses to Gulf allies.<sup>14</sup> Preliminary work has also begun on forming a formal U.S.-led political alliance inclusive of the Sunni Gulf states plus Egypt, Jordan, and possibly Israel to counterbalance a nuclear-capable Iran aligned with Syria and their proxies.<sup>15</sup>

What makes this situation puzzling is that Turkey—a longstanding Western ally and historical rival of Iran—is nowhere to be found in this coalition. In fact, in

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<sup>8</sup> Frederic Wehrey et al, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2009; Ali Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics," *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Balancing involves rising to counter powerful or threatening states by allying and/or internal arming.

<sup>11</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "US Says Exercise by Israel Seemed Directed at Iran," *New York Times*, June 20, 2008; "Israel Wraps Up Extensive Military Exercise," Agence France-Presse, May 21, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> The Gulf States refers to the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>13</sup> L. Barkan, "Reactions in the Gulf to Tension over Iranian Nuclear Issue," *MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series Report*, No. 603, April 8, 2010;

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/o/o/o/o/o/o/4086.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Warrick, *Washington Post*, January 31, 2010; Sanger and Schmitt, *New York Times*, January 30, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Sick, "Sick: Alliance Against Iran," CFR.org Interview with Bernard Gwertzman, January 23, 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/12477/sick.html>; Richard N. Haass and Martin Indyk, "Beyond Iraq: A New US Strategy for the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan.-Feb., 2009.

recent months Turkey appears to have rejected the U.S.-led approach to counter the rising Iranian threat for its own preferred path, a surprising divergence from Turkey's historical alignment.

## **The Turkish-Western Alliance**

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Since the founding of the modern Turkish state out of the Ottoman ashes, Turkey began a slow but inexorable drive over the course of nearly a century to situate itself squarely in the Western fold. The process of forging a modern, secular identity was coupled with overtures to the West, and following the beginnings of Cold War, Turkey had situated itself within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by 1952.<sup>16</sup> Since then, despite its tumultuous domestic politics, Turkey continued to deepen its institutional integration with the West by joining the Council on Europe, the OECD, the OSCE, the World Trade Organization, and most notably, by attempting to join the European Union since 1987.

Even after the Cold War, Turkey continued to seek close strategic relations with the United States for its security umbrella alongside a source of arms supplies and domestic-industrial activity.<sup>17</sup> Turkey's own Incirlik Air Base provided a pivotal platform for air operations logistics and transport for major U.S.-led engagements in the Middle East including the first Gulf War, patrolling the Iraqi no fly-zone, as well as the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> The degree of trust embedded in the U.S.-Turkish relationship is best evidenced by Turkey's Incirlik being the longtime custodian of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons allotted for NATO.<sup>19</sup> Given the historical closeness of U.S.-Turkish relations and Turkey's desire for continued Western integration, one would expect Turkey to align itself with the U.S. strategy and objectives on "the single greatest challenge for American security interests in the Middle East."<sup>20</sup> Instead, there appears to be a noticeable Turkish departure from U.S. balancing strategy towards Iran.

### *A State Behavioral Shift*

Analysts and commentators have pointed to a series of events as evidence of the shift in Turkey's behavior including the deepening of political and economic ties to Iran and Syria despite its neighbors or allies warnings of Iranian nuclear ambitions,

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<sup>16</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership: US-Turkish Relations in an Era of Global Geopolitical Change*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2010; F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics," *Survival*, 52, no. 2 (April-May 2010), pp. 157-180; Soner Cagaptay, "Is Turkey Leaving the West?" *ForeignAffairs.com*, October 29, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership*, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Hyland, "US Air Base at Incirlik Faces Political and Security Threats," *Terrorism Focus* published by the Jamestown Foundation, 4 no. 42 (December 19, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Bell and Benjamin Loehrke, "The Status of US Nuclear Weapons in Turkey," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, November 23, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice quoted in Robin Wright, "U.S. to Impose New Sanctions Targeting Iran's Military," *Washington Post*, October 25, 2007. Similar sentiments have been voiced by current administration officials including the National Security Council's Dennis Ross quoted in Josh Rogin, "Dennis Ross Links Middle East Peace to Iran," *Foreign Policy's "The Cable"*, May 5, 2010.

its condemnation of Israeli actions in its Occupied Territories, the replacement of Israel with Syria (the closest ally of Iran) for joint military exercises, the brokering of a uranium-swap agreement with Iran in conjunction with Brazil against U.S. objections, and a defiant vote against a new round of U.S.-led sanctions against Iran at the United Nations Security Council.<sup>21</sup>

A leading scholar of Turkish geopolitics, Sonar Cagaptay, voices the concern and puzzlement of the West, writing:

“Turkey's policy vis-à-vis Iran appears to be enabling Iran to deflect Western criticism over its nuclear program, while continuing to stockpile the material needed to construct a nuclear weapon. The question remains – Is Ankara's Iran policy good for Turkey?”<sup>22</sup>

Even U.S. officials have explicitly echoed this concern over Turkish drift: “Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates mused that Turkey was ‘moving eastward,’ a shift he attributed to the European Union’s tepid response to Turkey’s application to join it. That is a narrative that is gaining ground: Turkey, the East-West bridge, sided with the East because it had lost its way on its path to becoming more like the West.”<sup>23</sup> Picking up on the metaphor, one commentator wrote recently, “The bridge is now burnt. Turkey has taken sides, and the winner is the East.”<sup>24</sup>

## **Competing Explanations**

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### *Culturalist Theories*

The dismay at Turkey’s seemingly indecipherable behavior that some observers have expressed is no better demonstrated than in a recent article published in *World Affairs*. In it, Claire Berlinski suggests Turkey’s actions in the past years that stray from the Western camp cannot possibly be explained along any rational grounds and turns to an ad-hoc culturalist theory of Turkish emotionalism to explain foreign policy decision-making: “The utter irrationality of Turks—and the utter uselessness, for them, of our Western notions of truth and logic—are points Americans won’t grasp.”<sup>25</sup> Seeking to explain the recent Turkish brokered deal for a fuel swap with Iran, Berlinski writes, “Logic is not the source of this initiative: emotions are.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For an overview of these various shifts, see Cagaptay, 2009; Mahmood Hasan, “Can Sanctions Deter Iran?” *The Daily Star*, June 13, 2010; “After Snubbing Israel, Turkey to Hold Defense Drills with Syria,” *Haaretz* (via *Reuters*), October 14, 2009; Sabrina Tavernise, “For Turkey, an Embrace of Iran is a Matter of Building Bridges,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Soner Cagaptay, “Does Turkey’s Iran Policy Serve Turkey?” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 31, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, “For Turkey, an Embrace of Iran is a Matter of Building Bridges,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Claire Berlinski, “Smile and Smile: Turkey’s Feel-Good Foreign Policy,” *World Affairs*, July/August, 2010, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 43.

The weakness of this culturalist theory is that it cannot explain Turkey's relative success or consistency in geopolitics over the last half century. If Turkish culture truly inhibits its foreign policy from "long-term, rational economic and geostrategic interests,"<sup>27</sup> then faced with the pitfalls of nation-building in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that collapsed many a state and imperiled countless regimes, Turkey should not have survived, let alone grown in terms of economic and geopolitical power. In an anarchic world of competing actors where states capitalize on if not punish each other's weaknesses, such Turkish irrationality should have cost it dearly, particularly in such a difficult and conflict-prone neighborhood surrounded by the Middle East, the Caucasus, and longtime Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. Instead, it has done remarkably well for a state forged in the twentieth century, implying that a "culture of irrationality" thesis lacks any serious purchase or explanatory power.

### *Regime Ideology Theories*

A more prominent contemporary effort to explain Turkey's recent behavior, found in opinion pieces and op-ed columns, employs the variable of regime type. Claiming that Turkey has undergone a soft regime change from a secular to an Islamist state with the election of the Islamist AK Party, the regime ideology theory contends that the Islamist nature of Turkey's government can directly account for its change in international behavior. This is no better exemplified than a recent piece by Michael Rubin in *Commentary* magazine. He writes:

A decade ago, Turks saw themselves in a camp with the United States, Western Europe, and Israel; today Turkish self-identity places the country firmly in a camp led by Iran, Syria, Sudan, and Hamas... Turkey today is an Islamic republic in all but name. Washington, its European allies, and Jerusalem must now come to terms with Turkey as a potential enemy. Alas, even if the AKP were to exit the Turkish stage tomorrow, the changes Erdogan's party have made appear irreversible. While Turkey was for more than half a century a buffer between Middle Eastern extremism and European liberalism, today it has become an enabler of extremism and an enemy of liberalism. Rather than fight terrorists, Turkey embraces them. Today's rhetorical support may become tomorrow's material support. On the world stage, too, Turkey is a problem. Rather than help diffuse Iran's nuclear program, Erdogan encourages it.<sup>28</sup>

A number of other commentators imply Turkey's strategic shift is driven by religious ideology. Daniel Pipes, citing opinion pieces by Barry Rubin and Caroline Glick, describes "the distancing of Turkey from the West in general and Israel in particular..." as a part of the "...AK party's Islamist world view."<sup>29</sup>

This regime ideology theory specifically assumes that the *religious* nature of the party in power has altered the structure of the state (termed by some as soft regime change or revolution), which accounts for its behavior rather than other factors such as shifts in the global economy, shifts in the immediate security

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid 44.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Rubin, "Turkey, From Ally to Enemy," *Commentary*, July/August, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Pipes, "Lion's Den: Turkey: An Ally No More," *Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 27, 2009.

environment, or the regional political neighborhood that might affect Turkish international behavior and foreign policy. It of course ignores evidence to the contrary that the Islamist-led government has sought to support and embrace the West at times. Over the past decade, Turkey has continued to support U.S. operations in the Middle East and committed troops to U.S./NATO objectives in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, it has been the very same Islamist party that has spearheaded closer integration with the European Union, a direct contradiction with claims of Islamist rejection of the West.

Implicit in the religious/regime ideology thesis is that should a secular party be leading the Turkish state, it would be firmly aligning with U.S. efforts regardless of the tectonic shifts in the international system –in the economic, political, and security environment -- over the last twenty years that might alter incentives and condition state behavior. In other words, these foreign policy pundits may have suffered from omitted variable bias failing to hold a variety of other factors that might be driving changes in state behavior constant and thereby effectively conflating the correlation of religious party dominance and foreign policy shifts with causation.

Drawing from the academic IR literature on alliance politics and balancing or bandwagoning behavior, this paper seeks to offer potential alternatives to the culturalist or regime ideology theories that might explain the Turkish state's behavior.<sup>30</sup> Though it seeks to be thorough, this is by no means meant to provide a comprehensive set of hypotheses or conclusive results. Instead, the paper embarks on more of a plausibility probe exercise drawing on some of the major IR theories or hypotheses to serve as a bulwark for future research that might more rigorously test these theories against each other.

### *Searching for Alternatives from IR Theory*

A fundamental concept underpinning realist theories of IR is that states seek to maximize security by maintaining a balance of power. Whether in response to a growth in capabilities<sup>31</sup> or a growth in threats,<sup>32</sup> most realist IR scholars expect balancing behavior to be dominant amongst states except in cases of very weak or small states contending with great powers. Thus, in response to the growing power and threatening nature of Iran, realism predicts rational actors, whose security is threatened by such a shift, will begin to balance Iran. While actions taken by states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Israel, and the EU-3 are all rendered understandable, Turkey's defiance remains puzzling. Given the requisite conditions for balancing, why isn't Turkey engaging in balancing Iran, both internally and externally, as many of its regional peers seem to be doing? Further, what IR theories might help to explain the Turkish state's recent behavior?

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<sup>30</sup> Additionally, while the religious ideology thesis implicitly assumes Turkish behavior to be bandwagoning, there are distinct types with different causal mechanisms. One is simply bandwagoning out of ideology as the religious thesis assumes but bandwagoning can also be motivated by appeasement or opportunism.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen M Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

Since Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt formulated the simple *balancing* and *bandwagoning* behaviors,<sup>33</sup> developments in IR theory over the past two decades have identified a wider array of potential state behaviors including *buck-passing* (also termed *shirking* or *free-riding*), *soft balancing*, *transcendence*, *omnibalancing*, and *underbalancing*. This variety of possible behaviors might provide alternative theories to account for Turkey's eastward turn. Instead of culture or religious ideology, the IR literature underscores relative threat perception or rationalist factors in the domestic or international environment such as collective action problems. We now turn to examine some of the major IR literature on alliances and balancing that might provide some answers.

## **International System Hypotheses**

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While culturalist and ideological theories' level of analysis focuses on the domestic or individual regime, this section turns to a family of rationalist IR theories focused on the international system<sup>34</sup> to account for the shift in Turkish behavior.

### *Buck-Passing*

A prominent IR theory accounts for states failing to balance power or threat by proposing an account of *buck-passing*.<sup>35</sup> Also termed "free-riding," "shirking," or "hiding,"<sup>36</sup> the concept gets at the fundamental collective action problem of balance-of-power alliance politics.<sup>37</sup> The first-movers or initiators of a balancing coalition have to absorb the concentrated costs for diffuse benefits incenting states to delay balancing and buck-pass or free-ride on other states while still reaping the security benefits.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the realist-predicted process of balancing may emerge inefficiently in a piecemeal fashion and potentially fail. This was nearly the case in World War II where French and British defensive postures were essentially designed to pass the costs off to other allies.<sup>39</sup>

The costs of balancing include the costs of arms procurement, foreclosing on trade relationships (for instance with sanctions), domestic political costs, and the risk of cost escalation and conflict.<sup>40</sup> Of course balancing too late makes a state vulnerable to extortion or conquest by a revisionist aggressor state seeking to upend

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<sup>33</sup> Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Waltz, 1979 terms these system-level theories the "third-image" with second-image theories focused on the regime/domestic politics level and "first image" focused on individual leaders.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist theory, *International Security*, Vol. 19, no. 1, (Summer 1994), pp. 108-148.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," *International Security* 30, 1 (Summer 2005).

<sup>38</sup> While buck-passing or free-riding describes a behavior at the system level (a collective action problem), hiding or shirking are the terms for the individual behaviors of states generally too weak or inconsequential to take a side and thus chooses to ignore a threat or attempt to declare neutrality

<sup>39</sup> Posen, 1984, 232-33.

<sup>40</sup> Christensen and Snyder, 1990.

the status quo balance of power. Thus under specific conditions where states believe defense is dominant while wars are more drawn out and costly due to the advantage of the defense, states are more likely to buck-pass and let other absorb the cost.<sup>41</sup> However, buck-passing may result not simply from a craven effort to dodge costs but a calculated economization or conservation of resources for strategic purposes.<sup>42</sup> The point is that those strategies may be miscalculations resulting from perceptions of offensive or defensive advantage.

While there is no expectation that Turkey will engage in a war with Iran, buck-passing may explain why Turkey appears to insufficiently balance internally (through arming) or externally (through alliance commitments)<sup>43</sup>. Turkey may seek to do this since both are costly and absorb extra risks while they may perceive their current level of risk to be mitigated by the advantage of the defensive. This seems entirely plausible since Turkey's estimation of threat is minimized by its belief in the defensibility of its territory from conventional attack due to military superiority and defense from nuclear coercion due to its nuclear umbrella. In this case, Turkey may refuse to balance indefinitely, and ride free, particularly if they suffer no punishment for failing to join a balancing coalition or can reap all the security benefits from what is essentially a non-exclusionary public good.<sup>44</sup>

### *Soft Balancing*

Another refinement to realist propositions stemmed from an effort to explain the empirically puzzling absence of a balancing coalition—realism's chief prediction—against the U.S. concentration of power since the Cold War and perceived aggression since the late 1990s. Two scholars proposed the concept of *soft balancing* to explain the efforts by other major states and great powers to employ nonmilitary diplomatic and institutionalist tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine perceived aggressive U.S. policies.<sup>45</sup> In other words, soft balancing may be considered the early precursor of a hard-balancing coalition to raise the costs of hegemonic interests, signal resolve, and begin to coordinate efforts to solve the collective action dilemma of a balancing coalition.

Applying the argument to the current context, it is conceivable that Turkey's recent behavior towards Iran may be directed more towards the United States (or even Israel). In other words, the puzzle can be explained by a hidden or differential threat prioritization. Turkey may have an incentive to soft balance the United States or Israel to impede their efforts at regional or global hegemony.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 165-66.

<sup>43</sup> James D. Morrow, "Arms Versus Allies: Trade-Offs in the Search for Security," *International Organization*, 47, no. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 207-233.

<sup>44</sup> Security can be a public good if it is non-rival and non-excludable. In this case, the security provided by pacifying an aggressive Iran, stemming its growth and influence, and dissuading it from developing nuclear weapons might constitute a public good that most of the region if not the world would arguably benefit from, even if they did not contribute to the balancing coalition.

<sup>45</sup> Pape, 2005; T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, 30, 1, Summer 2005.

In 2003, Turkey sought to impede U.S. efforts to launch a preventative war on Iraq, anticipating negative repercussions throughout the region, particularly jeopardizing their own security with an unleashing of the Kurdish insurgency within Turkey.<sup>46</sup> The unleashing of the Kurds has Turkey particularly upset with the United States and concerned about its future actions in the region.<sup>47</sup> Today again, Turkey is concerned with U.S. intentions towards the Middle East. Anticipating a U.S. bid for regional or global hegemony, especially through its actions towards Iran, Turkey may see scuttling U.S. diplomatic efforts at sanctions as a necessity to stave off a ramp-up towards war against Iran and the further destabilizing consequences it would entail for the region. In other words, Turkey's policy towards Iran may be an effort to balance the United States, believing it to be more of a threat to the region through its hegemonic ambitions or its recklessness.

Another potential scenario is that Turkey is soft balancing Israel, whose efforts in the past decade to preserve its total freedom of military action (invasions of Lebanon and the occupied territories, a blockade of Gaza, its recent raid on a flotilla of relief ships, a preventative strike on Syria, and a planned preventative strike on Iran) are perceived as aggressive, regionally hegemonic, and dangerous for Turkish security.<sup>48</sup> These scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Turkey's actions on Iran could be intended to soft balance both the United States and Israel, whose actions over the past decade may be seen as destabilizing forces for Turkish interests, especially if the United States is perceived to provide unfettered support for Israeli actions.

### *Tightness of Distribution*

A third theory that implies the current conditions have not passed a threshold to trigger balancing behavior is Wagner's theory of international system's "tightness."<sup>49</sup> A tight distribution of power forces states to take sides and align in particular camps because failing to do so leaves it vulnerable. This is what happened during the Cold War and forced most reluctant European nations into the American camp to balance the Soviet Union. A loose distribution of power in the international system on the other hand would not compel states to firmly align in a camp.

Since the end of the Cold War, a loose distribution has emerged and this might account for why we see a general loosening and strategic drift amongst once firmly aligned states including the seeming Turkish drift between two hardening camps. However, this theory is too broad and more applicable for great powers over large stretches of time rather than a fine-grained explanation of regional balancing behavior. Wagner's theory over-predicts the weakness of alliances and cannot

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<sup>46</sup> Pape, 2005, p. 38-40; F. Steven Larrabee, "Managing a More Assertive Turkey," *CFR Interview* with Bernard Gwertzman, June 3, 2010, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/22302/managing\\_a\\_more\\_assertive\\_turkey.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/22302/managing_a_more_assertive_turkey.html)

<sup>47</sup> Larrabee, *Troubled Partnership*, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> David Ignatius, "Flotilla Raid Offers Israel a Learning Opportunity," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> R. Harrison Wagner, "What Was Bipolarity?" *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 1993), p. 77-106.

account for the evident regional variation in which some Middle East states are balancing Iran while Turkey is not.

In addition to the system theories by realist scholars, historians have questioned the empirical validity of balancing propositions offering two alternative forms of behavior—transcendence and bandwagoning—that are under-predicted or ignored.

### *Transcendence*

One explanation for Turkish actions is an empirically observed but under-theorized form of behavior Schroeder calls *transcendence*. In such cases, states seek to transcend or surmount the conditions of international anarchy by seeking to “go beyond the normal limits of conflictual politics: to solve the problem, end the threat, and prevent its recurrence through some institutional arrangement involving an international consensus or formal agreement.”<sup>50</sup>

Recent Turkish actions provide some evidence for this theory where it appears to be attempting to play such a mediating or pivot role<sup>51</sup> to provide an institutional remedy to the problem of the Iranian nuclear program, most recently through its efforts with Brazil to broker a fuel swap deal. Rather than pure altruism, transcendence may still possess rationalist motives and logic to reduce balancing costs while achieving other secondary goals. Turkey may also be seeking to demonstrate its indispensability as a pivot to target audiences including the EU for the goal of accession and NATO in order to retain its security umbrella.

The weakness of this explanation is that it historically appears to be a type of interim or short-term behavior that eventually backslides into either buck-passing or balancing since even Schroeder fails to provide evidence that transcendence actually works or endures over time.

### *Bandwagoning*

While realist IR theory is quite compelling conceptually, some scholars have tried to explain the inconvenient empirical discrepancy in which it appears that often times, states do not balance but more often bandwagon.<sup>52</sup> One possibility to consider is a state’s choice to bandwagon instead of balance under certain conditions. States may bandwagon with greater powers due to shared ideology,<sup>53</sup> out of a desire to appease

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<sup>50</sup> Schroeder, 1994, p. 117. Schroeder’s empirical evidence for this behavior includes Austria’s attempt to negotiate a peace to end the Napoleonic wars, Austrian interventions again during the Crimean war, and a host of actors efforts to mediate and negotiate differences during World War I.

<sup>51</sup> Larrabee, *Turkey’s New Geopolitics*, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> When recognizing that realist IR theory’s scope conditions, particularly Waltz’s neorealism, is focused on great power politics and behavior, it is unsurprising then that there is a vast empirical record that would diverge from realist predictions. This is because the majority of the world in the post WWII sovereign state system is composed of small, weak states that have no choice but to bandwagon with great powers.

<sup>53</sup> Walt, 1987.

an aggressor state,<sup>54</sup> likely if the state is relatively small or weak compared to the aggressor state,<sup>55</sup> out of a desire for profit or aggression,<sup>56</sup> or when they believe they have no other choice.<sup>57</sup>

The evidence of Turkish bandwagoning with Iran is pretty thin and the exploration of the motives that might be driving such behavior reveals the argument to be even weaker. In the case of Turkey, even acknowledging the rise of a soft political Islamism, this hardly qualifies as a revolution or shared ideology on par with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The states still differ significantly on sectarian identities, the role and intensity of Islam in social practice, and the legacies of secularism versus theocracy in politics and governance. The appeasement explanation also seems flimsy given most estimations of power that have Turkey outranking Iran.<sup>58</sup> And while Turkey may seek to take advantage of playing the role of a pivotal player in terms of international political capital and reputation, this hardly qualifies as bandwagoning for profit or aggression but simply *realpolitik*. Overall, it is hard to equate evidence of Turkey inhibiting U.S. and Israeli strategies towards Iran with Turkey actively bandwagoning with Iran as the ideology/regime camp claims. Even a relative shift in Turkish behavior towards Iran does not appear to be a total shift in Turkey's alliance politics out of the Western fold.

### **Alternative Domestic Hypotheses**

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The international system level explanations—particularly buck-passing and soft balancing, which respectively emphasize mechanisms of collective action and relative threat perception—provide some insights into what is driving Turkish state behavior, but in a complex, multi-causal environment, a closer examination of the “second-image” domestic factors driving Turkish foreign policy could also prove fruitful. While domestic explanations described earlier favor culturalist or ideological variables that are quite limited, rationalist domestic explanations of alliance politics may provide greater explanatory power. By employing mechanisms similar to the international explanations, the two concepts—*omnibalancing* and *underbalancing*—help to explain Turkey's curious behavior towards the West and Iran.

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<sup>54</sup> Schroeder, 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Walt, 1987.

<sup>56</sup> Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): p. 72-107.

<sup>57</sup> Eric J. Labs, “Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims,” *Security Studies*, 6 no. 4, 1997, p. 1-49.

<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Iran may not pose as salient shift in the balance of threat in Turkey's estimation. Based on Walt's four criteria for measuring the level of “threat”—aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions—Turkey appears to have a higher aggregate power than Iran (measured in Composite Index of National Capability scores), lacks the expansive or disputed borders that other states share, appears far less vulnerable to Iranian asymmetric offense since it has no Shia minorities to be incited and maintains the protection of NATO's security and nuclear umbrella, and does not perceive Iran as a revisionist, aggressor state like most states seeking to balance Iran. See Tavernise, 2010.

## *Omnibalancing*

While balancing behavior was initially conceptualized to explain great power politics, scholars found mixed results when applying it to middle powers or simply lesser states. Steven David's concept of omnibalancing emphasized relative threat perception to explain the curious phenomena of third world alignment with seemingly threatening powers.<sup>59</sup> Since a number of these states perceived internal movements to be greater threats to their regime than external actors, they chose alignments based on the prospects for balancing this more pressing internal threat. Since many states are relatively new—a historically contingent product of decolonization and new post-WWII international norms—they remained unconsolidated and exhibited significant violent domestic competition for power that made a regime's and state's hold on power tenuous. When a primary threat to a regime or leader is domestic in nature, the regime may rationally align with or appease a secondary external threat in order to counter the primary internal one.<sup>60</sup>

This concept of omnibalancing appears highly applicable to the case of Turkey. Turkey's movement towards Iran and away from the West may be a pivot to contain the Kurdish insurgency in the Eastern Anatolian region, which has intensified in recent years with cross-border attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) from safe havens in Iraq. A recent RAND report describes this insurgency that threatens the country's territorial integrity as "Turkey's number-one security concern" establishing the internal threat as primary over any external threats.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, the United States has not only been unsupportive of Turkish efforts to contain the Kurdish uprising, in fact hampering its ability to take military action against the PKK, but is also believed to be the proximate cause of this insurgent resumption. Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Turkey expressed concern that destabilization of the Iraqi regime would effectively provide operational freedom, safe havens, and political support for the Kurds to destabilize neighboring states. Turkey proved to be correct and has suffered the negative externalities induced by U.S. actions. Its fears have been exacerbated by the Iraqi Kurdish region's increasing autonomy that raises the potential for a Kurdish state.

By contrast, Iran has a mutual interest in Kurdish containment since it also retains a large Kurdish minority vulnerable to separatist agitations stemming from Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran has cooperated with Turkey on military, intelligence, and political levels since the 1990s and in conjunction with Syria, is expanding coordination efforts at present to contain the Kurdish insurgency.<sup>62</sup> This all suggests

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<sup>59</sup> Steven R. David, 1991 "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, p. 233-256.

<sup>60</sup> David, 1991 describes Mengistu's regime in Ethiopia which traded American for Soviet patronage, despite Soviet support for Ethiopia's chief external threat, Somalia, because the Soviets offered Mengistu greater support for combating the internal rebellion led by Eritrean separatists.

<sup>61</sup> Larrabee, *Troubled Relationship*, 2010, p. xi.

<sup>62</sup> "Iran, Turkey Co-ordinate Against Kurds," *CNN*, June 5, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/06/05/turkey.iran/index.html>; Michael M. Gunter, "Turkey and Iran Face Off in Kurdistan," *The Middle East Quarterly*, 5, no. 1, March 1998, pp. 33-40; Ercan Yavuz, "Turkey Takes the Fight to PKK, Enlists Help of Syria, Iran,"

Iran is proving to be a far more essential Turkish ally than the United States or the broader West on its most pressing security concerns. Turkey may have good, rational motives for aligning with an Iran that may pose a distant secondary external threat to balance its more acute Kurdish threat.<sup>63</sup>

### *Underbalancing*

A simpler concept of underbalancing is developed by Schweller to provide a rational explanation of these non-events through the lens of a collective action problem.<sup>64</sup> Schweller argues that the prevailing balance of power theory assumes states are unitary actors and that they retain a constant mobilizational capacity. Instead, a state needs to actively engage in mobilizing resources and a public by providing incentives and accepting political costs and policy tradeoffs to balance threats, a process further complicated by a non-unified government struggling to coordinate internal and external balancing efforts but in disagreement on the source of threat or means to address it. This theory seeks to subsume most of the others discussed in the paper by attributing them to this fundamental domestic collective action problem. Underbalancing behavior, which "...includes buck-passing, distancing, hiding, appeasement, bandwagoning, and ineffective half measures,"<sup>65</sup> can result from such divisions.

Schweller identifies four variables to measure – elite consensus, elite cohesion, government/regime vulnerability, and social cohesion – with the former two assessing will and the latter two assessing capability for balancing. He applies this model to the case of British and French underbalancing of Germany in the 1930s. These variables help to explain how "...Incoherent, fragmented states are unwilling and unable to balance against potentially dangerous threats because elites view the domestic risks as too high, and they are unable to mobilize the required resources from a divided society."<sup>66</sup>

The theory of underbalancing seems to plausibly explain the Turkish state's puzzling behavior. There is undeniable lack of elite consensus and elite cohesion within the Turkish state. The Turkish political elite/government is deeply polarized and divided between the new political class of middle class Islamists led by the AKP and the old guard Kemalist political elite. They maintain divergent views over a host of issues including domestic politics and reform (Islamism vs. secularism), the approach to the Kurdish problem, efforts at economic liberalization and EU integration, and Turkey's role in the Middle East.<sup>67</sup> And while the AKP has shored up its power and may now firmly control the parliament, the nationalist old guard

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*Today's Zaman*, July 16, 2010, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-216185-turkey-takes-the-fight-to-pkk-enlists-help-of-syria-iran.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Again, CINC scores and threat perception may justify these estimations. See note 58.

<sup>64</sup> Randall L. Schweller. "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing." *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): p. 159-201.

<sup>65</sup> Schweller, 2004, p. 166.

<sup>66</sup> Schweller, 2004, p. 200.

<sup>67</sup> Henri J. Barkey, "Turkey's Moment of Inflection," *Survival*, 52, no. 3, June-July, 2010, p. 39-50; Steven A. Cook, "Turkey's War at Home," *Survival*, 51, no. 5, October-November, 2009, p. 105-120.

maintains a strong hold over institutions like the military, the judiciary and the media, affording them a significant advantage in national security debates.

Additionally, these elite divisions derive from the societal level with the shift in the balance of power between the modernized, nationalist urban intelligentsia and the rising middle classes of more religiously oriented merchant classes coming from the rural areas and Anatolian countryside. Turkish society is in flux due to deepening globalization over the past two decades, which then is reflected in elite level politics. Moreover, as the self-perceived guardians of the state, the nationalist military backed by the judiciary, which has seized power or ousted civilian leaders on more than one occasion, still poses a serious direct threat to the present AKP government and regime in power. Efforts by this military/nationalist wing to lead a soft-coup in 2007 followed by revelations of a “deep-state” reveal the vulnerability of the government in power.<sup>68</sup>

Since Turkey appears to meet all four conditions, it raises the likelihood that an expected outcome of such divisive and precarious politics is underbalancing externally. While ideology may carry some of the causal load as an internal mechanism fueling social and elite divides, this variable on its own remains underspecified and requires an analysis of mobilizational capacity and unified actors to explain balancing prospects. Conceptualized in rationalist terms as a domestic collective action problem, Turkey’s underbalancing or lack of balancing Iran becomes much easier to comprehend.

## **Conclusion**

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This paper has drawn on international relations theory to provide a number of plausible rationalist alternatives to the culturalist or (religious) ideological explanations for the Turkish state’s recent refusal to balance Iran as many have expected. The ultimate result is that there is not a compelling reason why we should expect Turkey to cooperate with the U.S.-led balancing coalition against Iran and even some reasons why we should expect Turkey to slightly align with Iran at this time. If the United States remains concerned about this fact, it needs to proactively alter the conditions and mechanisms that structure Turkish behavior.

The leading international and domestic explanations for Turkey’s failure to follow an expected balance-of-power employ one of two mechanisms: relative threat perception or collective action problems.<sup>69</sup> Relative threat perception—evident in soft balancing and omnibalancing—involves different calculations of costs and benefits based on priorities often unseen to outsiders. Collective action problems—evidenced by buck-passing, soft balancing, or underbalancing—explain why the requisite coordination for balancing, either at the domestic or inter-state level, may be delayed, inefficient, or simply unlikely to develop.

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<sup>68</sup> Barkey, 2010; Cook, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> The key elements within these mechanisms appear to be problems of information or credible commitment—the two factors identified in James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, 49, no. 3, 1995, p. 379-414.

Theoretically, this exercise has been useful to mediate the competing alternatives to balancing behavior with some found to be theoretically wanting (e.g. transcendence) while others can be consolidated into the two distinct mechanisms at work. Drawing on a case of a middle/regional power to further develop work on third-world alignment politics, this paper has also highlighted the importance of evaluating a state's domestic politics, particularly structural internal competition, to understand differential threat assessments and external balancing.

While providing potential explanations of Turkey's behavior, it also reveals a potential set of policy levers to affect the Turkish calculus. The recommendations that stem from this are that in order to alter Turkish calculations with positive inducements, the United States and the West would need to do something to raise the salience of the Iranian threat or provide a new exchange of security cooperation. This may include intelligence cooperation to reveal the logic of intelligence estimates on the Iranian threat, increased political and military cooperation on Turkey's Kurdish problem, EU accession, or direct financial and political support for Turkey's Islamist government to consolidate civilian rule and prevent the military from outflanking or overthrowing it.

Alternately, the United States could work to cautiously reduce Turkey's status quo confidence in the NATO security umbrella, perhaps by threatening to move U.S. tactical nuclear weapons out of Turkey, though there are obvious risks to this approach. Since this may jeopardize the use of Incirlik air base, to make a credible threat the United States would have to quickly cultivate an alternate air base in the theater or expand presence at existing ones inside Europe or the Middle East. Nevertheless, it may force Turkey to rethink its risk calculations of Iranian nuclear enrichment. Without such proactive measures, the problems of relative threat assessment and collective action may preclude Turkey's participation in the U.S. balancing coalition for some time to come.