A Neoclassical Realist Account of the Inception, Duration, and Death of the Turkish-Israeli Alliance

INTRODUCTION

Inter-state alliances form in the crucible of geopolitical competition.¹ Many present-day alliances were formed in the context of the Cold War wherein security concerns, changing material capabilities, and ideology informed states’ alliance preferences. In the post-Cold War period, however, the imperatives of inter-state competition have declined due to the absence of imminent external threats. In this new milieu, system-level imperatives send ambiguous signals to foreign policy elites. In times of structural ambiguity, a myriad of domestic and international institutional factors, as well as ideational and cultural factors have traditionally provided coherence and continuity to state preferences (Allison and Zelikow 1999; Snyder 1977; Levy 1984; Katzenstein 1996; Finnemore 1996; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009). This article explores what happens when these sources of continuity are displaced due to elite change, and how geopolitically permissive environments, in turn, empower them.²

The vicissitudes of Turkey’s relationship with Israel typify how a changing elite power structure removes traditional restraints on foreign policy. In the post-Cold War period, the two countries established a profitable military-economic partnership that appeared to be counterintuitive from the purview of traditional theories of alliance formation. Israel benefitted from military training cooperation with Turkey, while Israeli know-how helped to propel Turkey’s nascent defense industry at a time when Turkey was denied access to state-

¹ This research uses Levy and Barnett’s (1991, 370) definition of alliance, which is “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more states and involving mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions in the future.”
² Elite change is defined as the establishment, empowerment, and consolidation of governing coalition of powerful decision-making executives, and their supporters, and that originate from different sociological and ideological bases, and professions, than the previous ruling elite, with whom they are often in conflict.
of-the-art weapons systems by its Western allies. What is peculiar is that the alliance formed in the context of a domestic political clash in which Turkey’s traditional secular elites touted the relationship with Israel to humiliate and undermine their emerging conservative rivals. Once the new conservative elites assumed power, they sought to project Turkish leadership in the Middle East, again without much reference to existential security imperatives. This time, however, Israel served as a convenient foil. By 2010, the Turkish-Israeli partnership had wholly withered. A series of diplomatic spats between the two states culminated in the *Mavi Marmara* incident in which Israeli Defense Force (IDF) personnel seized a Turkish aid ship bound to Gaza, resulting in the death of several Turkish citizens. While relations have improved since this nadir, the Turkish-Israeli alliance is no more.

The abrupt emergence and dissolution of the alliance underscores the need to study the effects of domestic politics on foreign policy and alliance behavior. There is a lacuna in the literature concerning the impact of domestic political transformations, like elite change, and alliance termination. How does the shift in the *domestic* balance of power, which entails a breakdown of old authoritarian structures and the empowerment of new elites, lead to the termination of otherwise profitable international alignments? On a theoretical level, answering this question not only offers an opportunity to enrich our understanding of how interstate alliances can fail abruptly even under favorable structural conditions, but may also help us to think about the possible foreign policy trajectories of states undergoing such political transformations in the contemporary international system.

Beyond exploring the empirical enigma of the Turkish-Israeli alliance, another theoretical contribution of this research is offering an alternative perspective on alliance formation and termination concerning the neoclassical realist research program. Neoclassical realism refers to a body of foreign policy research that envisions foreign policy executives as being constrained by both international and domestic environments and is therefore not only
ideally suited to address gaps in structural realist theories, but also capable of crafting testable hypotheses on foreign policy outcomes. Specifically, while Neoclassical Realism has studied the effects of elites on foreign policy and states’ grand-strategic preferences in conjunction with system-level factors such as permissive and restrictive environments, a holistic analysis of alliance failure and domestic political change has eluded analytical scrutiny. Of further theoretical significance is the possibility of exploring areas of fruitful dialogue between the literature on the alliance politics of third world states, or “omnibalancing” (David 1991), and the internal political transformation of torn states like Turkey that suffer from domestic insecurity. Omnibalancing provides a compelling rationale for why the Turkish Armed Forces and secular elites elected to befriend Israel, thereby gaining indirect influence over the U.S. via the Israel Lobby, to balance against the rising tide of Islamists.

This article argues that traditional theories of alliance formation and termination fail to capture the nuances of the foreign policies of middle-power states like Turkey. The rise and fall of the Turkish-Israeli alliance occurred under permissive international environments in which Turkey’s foreign policy elites privileged their own strategic and ideational preferences rather than apparent external threats. In the course of the 1990s, Turkey’s secular elites, who were firmly in charge of foreign policy, elected to establish an alliance with Israel to bolster their domestic position. Consequently, the alliance was no longer tenable once Turkey’s new elites pursued a similar domestically-oriented strategy as that of their predecessors, but one with an overtly hostile discourse towards Israel. In other words, owing to its domestic political transformation, Turkey’s core national interests came to be defined by an entirely new clique whose values differed from their predecessors’ and who also found it domestically expedient to pursue an unrestrained foreign policy discourse against a formerly-esteemed alliance partner, thereby precipitating the conditions for the termination of the alliance.
The article illuminates these developments by way of conducting a longitudinal case study of the rise and termination of the Turkish-Israeli alliance through examining the domestic political developments in Turkey between 1990-2001 and 2002-2012. The following section provides a brief overview of the alliance formation/termination literature, which also discusses the utility of a neoclassical realist perspective, followed by the research designs, and, finally, a stylized and longitudinal case study of the emergence and termination, of the Turkish-Israeli alliance.

ALLIANCES IN WORLD POLITICS

Inter-state alliances are crucial for managing international security as they can be a means to deter threats (Walt 1997; Waltz 1979), aggregate power to fulfill states’ expansionist goals (Schweller 1994), and possibly for powerful states to rein in and restrain their allies (Gelpi 1999; Pressman 2008; Benson 2011), or engage in tethering (Weitsman 1997), although there may be limitations to the efficacy of alliance restraint (Fang et al. 2014). Alliances can also form with the view of safeguarding domestic interests because the pursuit of security is as much an internal project as it is an external one. This tendency is particularly relevant for “third world” regimes that often lack the legitimacy enjoyed by Western countries.

Third world leaders who perceive greater threats emanating from within their society may seek temporary alliances with other states in order to solve domestic distributional issues (Barnett and Levy 1991) and balance both external and domestic threats by way of omnibalancing (David 1991; Harknett and VanDenBerg 1997; Miller and Toritsyn 2005). Since domestic mobilization tends to be too costly for some regimes, external alliances can be used to acquire military-economic assets that can be deployed for domestic coercion. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the political-survival motive does not extend to developed and democratic states, as alliances can help states to free-ride off the security
afforded by alliances while governments can shift spending from defense to domestically popular welfare programs (Kimball 2010). While the initial establishment of the Turkish-Israeli alliance may exemplify domestic-security expediency concerns, the abruptness and acrimony with which it was terminated seem to defy a purely regime-security and political-aggrandizement driven logic.

Despite the breadth of the alliance formation literature, there is a paucity of studies that examine conditions under which alliances fail (Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan 1973, 24-5, 29-30). Most accounts treat states as rational actors that shape their preferences based on changing material circumstances at the system-level such as the declining utility of the alliances and credibility of allies, changes in threat perception, and availability of alternative coalition partners (Walt 1997, 158-161; Leeds and Savun 2007). For an approach that considers international alliances as a key feature of international politics, structural realist theories of alliance formation are surprisingly agnostic about issues of their persistence and termination. Realists and other interest-based approaches treat alliances as temporary phenomena that change in response to the security environment. Realists especially would intuit that an alliance would break down once its raison d'être expires. One notable exception, however, concerns the utility of alliances in creating a durable international order in which a network of international alliances may promote the interests of the hegemonic state as well as those of its allies (Gilpin 1983; Ikenberry, 2001). One could further argue that the secondary effects of hegemony, such as the effects of socialization (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990) can influence the interests and preferences of elites in secondary states, which may help to explain the staying power of bilateral and multilateral alliances between a hegemonic state and its secondary-power allies. It is difficult, however, to apply this logic via negativa to the Turkish-Israeli alliance since both states are secondary powers and there is
little evidence to suggest that either country had aimed to aggregate capabilities against regional inter-state threats, bandwagon, or restrain one another.

Since capability-aggregation-based explanations of alliances have limitations in explaining alliance preferences and persistence, a rich literature has also developed around the salience of other factors. These include common ideology and regime type among allies (Haas 2003, 40-2; Mousseau 1997), although there is some evidence against this (Simon and Gartzke 1996, 630); identity and values (Risse-Kappen 1996, 365; Barnett and Telhami 2002; Adler and Barnett 1998; Gartzke and Weisiger 2012); and the role of political-economic advantages in maintaining alliances (Digiuseppe and Poast 2016). Another important strand in the literature focuses on the counterintuitive persistence of multilateral alliances like NATO, which due to institutionalization (McCalla 1996) or cultural factors (Sjursen 2004) seems to have outlived its main antagonist. Overall, non-security factors have considerably better analytical leverage in explaining alliance persistence.

Meanwhile, alliances can fail because of unit-level processes such as generational shifts in decision-makers, foreign policy populism, regime change, and ideological divisions (Walt 1997, 161-4). On the surface, these variables seem to have much in common with the present argument, but elite change is nevertheless a distinct phenomenon. Generational shifts denote changing foreign policy priorities over time as elites adopt new paradigmatic beliefs in reaction to the previous generation’s experience (Roskin 1974, 562). Given the small time-frame and the endurance of inter-elite rivalries, generational arguments would be better suited to explaining intra-elite paradigm shifts. Regime type has also received extensive treatment, especially from the quantitative alliance literature (Siverson and Starr 1994), but is also a different phenomenon because it relates to a wholesale transformation of not only the power structure but the institutional makeup of the state. These studies all show that common
interests, values, and regimes can engender institutionalization, thereby promoting alliance cohesion and persistence.

While a state’s security environment may quickly change, political, cultural, and institutional variables tend to have staying power, which would not portend well for the goals of the article because structural ambiguity would be considered as a constant in both the establishment and termination of the alliance. Neither the emergence nor the termination of the Turkish-Israeli alliance is attributable to international structural change, regime change, nor changes in identity *per se*. Of course, the alliance did collapse under the tenure of a new and Islamist government, but this provides neither a satisfactory explanation nor does it account for the complexities of Turkey’s governmental structure. A simple change of government would not account for the fundamental shift in Turkish foreign policy. One can, however, study political processes like elite conflict. That is, we can understand a great deal about changing attitudes towards allies by way of examining the impact of political processes on states’ preferences and behavior.

There is some precedent for this type of research. The competition between different elites, militaries, and non-state interest groups, in pursuit of their interests, can lead to different mobilization strategies that often result in violent foreign policy outcomes. If elites define and securitize threats based on auxiliary interests as much as actual material threats, and shape the national agenda according to their interests, it would make sense that inter-elite competition, and transitions, could result in mobilization strategies that lead to externally aggressive foreign policies. Snyder (1993, 20) argues that elites representing various interests across political institutions and industrial sectors exchange favors with one another and propagate expansionist myths to consolidate their political coalitions, which can result in imperialist foreign policies. Inter-elite conflict can also lead politicians to adopt aggressive foreign policies to consolidate power domestically, as exemplified in Adamson’s (2001)
exploration into Turkey’s decision to intervene in Cyprus. Inter-elite conflict and elite change seems to engender, at least in the short-term, aggressive foreign policy restructuring due to variations in elites’ mobilization strategies (Snyder 1993, 20; Mansfield and Snyder 1995, 7-8; 2002, 298; Malcolm and Prada 1996; Adamson 2001) and there is evidence that newly empowered elites pursue alternative foreign policies that can antagonize long-standing allies (Lee 2008; Jung 2013).

While providing some clues, these studies do not sufficiently help explain our case at hand as they concern foreign policy restructuring and aggression over time rather than situational alliance preferences. The democratization and foreign policy literature provides some clues by underscoring the significance of elite change as well as shifts in foreign policy due to patterns of inter-elite conflict and varying domestic mobilization strategies. Turkey’s hybrid political regime exhibited qualities significantly different from many of the previously studied cases, and its transformation unleashed dynamics that are not wholly captured by any existing security, rational-political, interest, or identity-based explanations. The next section, therefore, develops the theoretical argument that will contextualize political transformations in the post-Cold War environment, especially those of torn states such as Turkey, and their impact on national-interest formation. This discussion forms the basis of this article’s neoclassical realist framework of analysis.

THE ARGUMENT

Neoclassical realism provides an excellent lens with which to survey the impact of elite change on alliances because it incorporates unit-level factors to the study of foreign policy (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009; Rose 2003). The approach is often invoked to explain how domestic factors and microprocesses can interject themselves on the calculus of decisionmakers, thereby resulting in the misdiagnoses of the external-security environment or
inefficient foreign policy responses (Schweller 2006), but neoclassical realism can also be used to explain a broad range of state behaviors, both spatially and temporally, as well as international outcomes (Taliaferro, Ripsman, and Lobell 2016). Neoclassical realism assumes that national interests are formulated by imperfect decision-makers with parochial interests, whose choices may be constrained by their perceptions of the international system as well as societal and institutional factors (see figure 1). This article investigates what happens to national interest formation in states in which the international security environment is less-restrictive and in which new elites assume power without prior socialization in institutions of national security and foreign policy.

Figure 1. The neoclassical realist framework of analysis

The international system can guide alliance choices in times when capabilities and threats limit decision-makers’ options (i.e., threats and allies are easy to identify) but when these signals are ambiguous, decision-makers may choose to respond to more immediate domestic threats or engage in self-aggrandizement. In such a scenario, domestic power consolidation is likely going to be their primary goal. This would entail the new elites further entrenching themselves in key positions and further building on popular societal support. National security matters that normally inform the foreign policy agenda then takes a back seat to domestically informed interests. The Turkish case suggests that in the absence of obvious external challenges, there may be three alternative sources of national interest formulation: the interests of the elite pact; the preferences of powerful individuals; and societal factors. From this formulation, it would not seem obvious that Turkey would seek to
break its alliance with Israel simply because the government and its supporters wanted it. What seemingly appears to have happened, however, is that these alternative sources of foreign policy militated against maintaining cordial relations with an otherwise valuable ally. In fact, in such a benign threat environment, one in which the new elites billed Turkey as a beacon of peace, the only conceivable external threat was a fictitious one but one that seemed to be popular with domestic audiences. In fact, the new elites were content to include societal actors in their foreign policy as well. This however paved the way to an international crisis, specifically, the *Mavi Marmara* incident, from which the alliance would be terminated.

**Research Design**

The Turkish-Israeli alliance is an excellent case to test the elite change power propositions. Turkey's bifurcated modernization project pitted a powerful statist-elite against a much weaker civil society (Aydınlı 2010, 495). As Turkey’s domestic power structure changed, so too did its foreign alignment choices. Choosing to focus on Turkey’s domestic transformation is eminently useful for two reasons. First, Turkey provides an instance of a country with a dual governance structure wherein the process of inter-elite conflict resulted in the ascendency of a new conservative-oriented elite, displacing previous statist elites. Secondly, a focus on Turkey affords one the chance to study a radical domestic transformation in one member of an alliance and how this led to a revision of its international alliance preference. After all, it was Turkey that set the course for terminating the alliance with Israel. Erdogan's outburst at the 2009 Davos Summit was a critical juncture that signaled the completion of a revolution in Turkey's national agenda and alignment policies.

The overall empirical approach to this article is through an examination of the elite structure of Turkey in the 1990s and the legal, political, and institutional transformation of the Turkish state in the 2000s via a stylized longitudinal case study analysis. In other words,
in this neoclassical realist analysis, the independent variable is kept as a constant while the intervening variable, the domestic elite structure, is of utmost importance. This may appear counterintuitive, but it is important to show that Turkey did abandon its hostility towards Israel somewhat after its threat environment changed. Regardless, if there is any merit to the theory under consideration, we would expect to find evidence of a relatively permissive international environment in both periods when the alignment was established and terminated (i.e., 1990-2001; 2002-2012), but that the nature of the elite coalition and domestic institutions were different. We would also find evidence of relatively cordial Turkish-Israeli relations during the heyday of Turkey’s statist elites, and intensifying antagonisms post domestic power transition, especially after 2007-2008. Finally, the theory under development here would expect that as the international system becomes more restrictive for Turkey’s new elites, their need to antagonize would diminish.

Beyond observing changes in actors and institutions, there is no straightforward way to delineate a notional national interest beyond inferring it from the substantive content of government documents and other elite pronouncements. Recent research on Turkish foreign policy also affords the chance to triangulate these findings with quantitative evidence. The Turkish Event Dataset (Tüzün and Biltekin 2013), for instance, has developed an extensive list of foreign policy actors and machine coded their interactions from 1991-2012 with data extracted from Agence France Presse, which reveals trends about Turkey relations with, among others, Israel (Tüzün and Biltekin 2013, 63-65) by longitudinally examining developments in Turkey’s foreign policy interactions. The qualitative findings of this research are, therefore, weighed against trends in Turkey’s interactions with Israel in the 1990-2012 period, with a special emphasis on patterns of material conflict, material cooperation, verbal conflict, and verbal cooperation.
THE GENESIS OF THE ALLIANCE

The Turkish-Israeli alliance has a multitude of conventional security-based explanations, but it is difficult to ascribe any decisive analytical weight to capability aggregation or interstate threat-based explanations. After the Cold War, Turkey was exploring new geopolitical options due to the termination of the Cold War and found itself in a position to establish new links in Central Asia and the Middle East; regions which respectively were formerly dominated either by direct Soviet rule or were inaccessible to Turkey due to the superpower rivalry and intermittent intraregional war. In the permissive environment of the post-Cold War period, Turkey upgraded its relations with Israel to ambassadorial level in 1992, signed two free trade agreements in 1994 and 1996, agreed to a military deal that would enable Israel to modernize Turkey’s weapons systems, and agreed to cooperate in intelligence sharing and military training.

To be sure, both countries benefitted materially from this arrangement. Israel could now rely on the strategic depth afforded by Turkish airspace, and the Turkish Armed Forces benefitted from enhanced deterrence as well as enhanced coercive diplomacy as Israel not only helped encircle Syria and Iraq but also gained access to valuable high-tech weaponry (Bir and Sherman 2002). It would be a post hoc fallacy, however, to suggest that these modest benefits conform to a realist rationale. If anything, there is robust evidence that these external justifications were used by secularist elites to mask their ulterior motive in balancing against domestic threats.

In the Turkey of the 1990s, external threats mattered to the extent that they affected internal ones. Turkey’s old elites were primarily concerned with the PKK and Islamist politics at home, but these had implications for Turkey’s relations with Syria, which aided the PKK and Iran, which sought to spread the Islamic revolution. Both were threats to the secular republican order in Turkey (Aras and Polat 2008, 508). The securitization of domestic threats...
such as political Islam and the PKK, and, concomitantly, their emergence as external threats, inspired a 'secular alliance' with Israel (Altunışık and Martin 2011, 571). Arguably, the secular alliance logic evidences the relevance of ideational factors too as Turkey and Israel both sought to foster a mutual image as secular, democratic, European nations (Bozdağhoğlu 2003, 149-153). As Alan Makovsky also notes (1996, 150), “Turkish-Israeli relations have always been characterized by a shared ‘common sense of otherness’ in a region dominated by non-democratic, predominantly Arab states.” Overall, it might be fair to conclude that while a realist analysis can account for the emergence of the alliance, domestic and possible non-security factors also contributed to Turkey choosing Israel as a viable partner.

_Dual Governance: Turkey's Bifurcated Elite Structure_

Turkey's statist, sometimes referred to as Ataturkist or Kemalist, elite, embodied in the bureaucracy and military, espoused a modernist nationalism that aimed to perpetuate Turkey as a unitary nation-state with a secular regime and a modern, westernized, society (Heper 2002, 140). These sentiments, largely a response to a traumatic experience of imperial collapse that was attributed to the enervating effects of traditionalism, were at odds with the preferences of Turkey's conservative society throughout its Republican history. The statist elites' threat environment was therefore fashioned on the understanding of national identity as a modernist project that sought to transform a religious-based feudal polity into a secular-rational society on par with Western countries.

A realist could make the case that the international system socialized these elite cadres into believing that Turkey must avoid, at all costs, the prospect of “falling by the wayside” (Waltz 1979, 118) due to inept or expansionist foreign policies; thus domestically, modernization/westernization had to continue apace. Consequently, Turkey’s military assumed a guardianship role over the state. For the statist elites, this led to a dilemma:
modernization, as such, was necessary for security but doing so necessitated decentralizing power in the former of greater democratic pluralism, which also carried higher risks. Making concessions to what was perceived to be the irrational parochial interests of elected officials could undermine the modernization project of the state (Aydınlı 2010, 697).

From this paradox emerged a bifurcated political system in which a politically influential military-bureaucracy assumed control over the hard-realm of high-politics which relegated elected officials into administering an ‘apparent-state’ that implemented day-to-day low-politics governmental functions. The statist elites held onto the reins of power due to the institutional power of the military and a separate realm of “state” and “government” became more apparent with each successful coup. After the 1960 coup, Turkey’s new constitution introduced the National Security Council (NSC) as a constitutionally mandated advisory body to the Council of Ministers. This council “embodied…the bureaucracy’s primacy over the popularly elected parliament…it was designed to serve as a platform for the military to voice its own opinion on matters of national security” (Sakallıoğlu 1997, 157). By the 1982 coup, the NSC virtually became “the highest, non-elected, decision-making body of the state” (Karabelias 1998, 29): a platform for the Turkish Armed Forces to interfere in political matters beyond national defense.

Prominent as it was, the Armed Forces did not govern alone. The old elites exercised considerable influence due to their control over other state institutions from which they originated as well, such as the civil service, judiciary, academia, journalism, among other things. Arguably, the power of this elite and the military was at a zenith in the 1990s due to a succession of weak coalition governments in Turkey.

*The Kemalist National Interest Manifested*
In 1996, the Islamist Necmettin Erbakan became the head of a coalition government, much to the chagrin of the military, which adopted a wait-and-see approach. In this weak coalition government, a “three-headed foreign policy” emerged under the respective domains of the military, which promoted relations with Israel; the Deputy Prime and Foreign Minister Tansu Çiller, who assumed control over relations with the EU; and Erbakan, who promoted relations with the Islamic world (Kosebalaban 2010, 42). While some government officials stated that Turkey could overturn its treaties with Israel at any time (Balci 1996), the military monopolized relations with Israel and ensured that Erbakan would comply by ratifying a new trade agreement with Israel on January 1, 1997.

What changed this status quo and led the old elite to topple Erbakan began with an Iranian funded anti-Israeli cultural event staged on Jerusalem Day in the conservative Sincan district of Ankara. Concomitant social unrest, especially from religious groups, as well as PKK terrorism provided the justification for the secular elite to respond. The Turkish Armed Forces immediately stepped in with tanks, virtually occupying the district, and arresting the mayor who had allowed this event to take place. The mood of the period was succinctly summed up by Daniel Pipes:

“All this is quite stunning. A town virtually occupied for celebrating Jerusalem Day? A mayor arrested and pushed out of his job for anti-Israeli remarks?... In the Middle East in 1997 this could only take place in Turkey, the one Muslim country where a powerful institution [The Turkish Armed Forces] completely rejects the demonization of Israel and instead fosters a hard kernel of pro-Israel sentiment” (Pipes 1997-1998).

In the midst of these tensions the NSC convened on the 28th of February to decide the fate of the Erbakan government. The Council identified the government’s moves as a primary threat and demanded that Erbakan cease what they considered to be reactionary activities. The military did not act alone, which is why their actions came to be dubbed a “Post-Modern Coup.” Various civilian channels helped to mobilize sentiments against the government,
including the “media, higher education, the business chambers, unions, and even politicians” all working together to “block the existing government from power” (Aydınlı 2011, 228). Public discourse sided with the army as concerns over the integrity of the secular regime manifested thanks to the efforts of the civilian components of the statist elite. In June 1997, Erbakan resigned. In the aftermath of this ‘post-modern coup,’ Islamic foundations were closed, Islamic capital boycotted, and the Constitutional Court ordered the closure of Erbakan's Welfare Party.

Most external-security oriented explanations of alliance behavior, even theories of omnibalancing, would be hard-pressed to explain why civil-society demonstrations against one’s ally would result in such a decisive intervention into domestic politics. The pretext of the alliance proved to be exceptionally useful because it legitimized a way to repress Islamic sentiments in society while humiliating the coalition government led by Erbakan (Yavuz 1997, 27; Pipes 1997-1998). As Aras (2000, 189) points out, “foreign policy [became] an extension of domestic politics and suffered under this yoke.” Turkey’s old elites succeeded in using an external pretext to silence a domestic enemy (figure 2 illustrates the argument). This would not be the last time that Israel would be used as a tool for domestic political contestation.

Figure 2. The logic of the argument
FOREIGN POLICY IN THE ‘NEW’ TURKEY

The notion of a Turkish-Israeli alliance became a well-established phenomenon in the 1990s and 2000s with bustling military cooperation and trade links that made it a hallmark of post-Cold War Middle Eastern geopolitics (Inbar 2010, 1). In spite of this, Turkey would go on to demote Israel to the status of an antagonist. The following sections argue that the collapse of the alliance is primarily due to Turkey’s domestic transformation. While institutional and other processes undermined the old elite, the new elite was able to capture the Turkish state and foreign policymaking. Given the permissive international environment of the 2002-2010 period, Turkey’s new elites felt that the burgeoning relationship with Israel was not essential and could propagate anti-Israeli rhetoric as needed for domestic audiences alike. This explanation is distinct from commonplace arguments about the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, or AKP hereafter) elites’ religious and conservative preferences because developments after the collapse of the alliance still suggest the relevance of inter-state security dynamics in influencing relations. After examining conventional external-security-oriented explanations of the collapse of the alliance, the remainder of the paper discusses the context of the emergence of the new elite and their foreign policy agenda.

Explaining the Decline of the Alliance

From the purview of structural realism, the collapse of the Turkish-Israeli alliance is perplexing due to the way it transpired. There were many reasons in the 1990s for the two countries to become allies. Since Turkey’s external environment was permissive, in the presence of internal threats Israel appeared to be an useful ally for Turkey’s old elites. Thanks to this alliance, Turkey was able to improve its security situation by forcing Syria to expulse the PKK, which led to improved relations. Meanwhile, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq ousted Saddam Hussein from power, which removed a major source of instability in the region but
replaced it with the imminent fear of state failure in Iraq and the prospects of Kurdish independence. Overall, the external security conjuncture in the 2000s was even more benign for Turkey, which may have diminished the importance of the alliance as evidenced by trends in military and economic trends among Turkey and its neighbors (see figure 3.).

Figure 3. Composite Index of National Capabilities Scores: Israel, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

Oğuzlu (2010) writes that the declining utility of the alliance in the absence of common interests is of main concern and therefore, the negative trend in the alliance conforms to neorealist logic. In fact, this may have been inevitable given that there never really was a permanent and common external threat to sustain any kind of alliance. While the PKK and international Islamism complicated Turkey’s relations with Syria and Iran, Turkey did not perceive these states as being existential threats whereas Israel did (Aytürk 2002, 681; Aras and Polat 2008). Kibaroğlu further notes (2005) that the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq created a situation in which Israel began supporting Kurdish fighters to the chagrin of Turkey. Indeed, while Turkey contemplated the dangers of a Kurdish state and its likely impact on its domestic Kurdish problem, Israel saw it as an opportunity to obtain an advantage over Iran.
One could speculate that Iran’s nuclear ambitions would have been a source of unity for Israel and Turkey. The fact that Turkish-Iranian relations improved despite Iran not only increasing its capabilities and revealing its nuclear ambitions contradicts conventional wisdom. Moreover, Iranian influence, it was feared, would form a ‘Shiite crescent’ (which would also have implications for the fate of Kurdish dominated Northern Iraq) that could upset the regional balance of power. Still, Turkish-Iranian relations improved with the signing of new energy deals. Turkey even joined Brazil in 2011 and exercised its rights as a temporary member of the UN Security Council to veto sanctions on Iran. Despite recognizing the danger of potential Iranian nuclear capabilities, Turkey has been much more vocal about the dangers to the regional stability posed by Israeli nuclear weapons. Although the regional international system sent unambiguous signals, Turkey’s new elites chose instead to desecuritize relations with Iran.

Beyond the counterintuitive Iranian issue, it still does not follow that absence of common interests would lead to the termination of an alliance with so much acrimony and violence unless other factors played a role. Israel’s policies might have become untenable for Turkey, but again it does not explain the termination of the alliance. Turkey’s ambitions to obtain a leadership role in the Middle East and promote peace clashed with what it perceived to be Israeli intransigence (Ulutaş 2010, 10). Granted, Israel is also criticized for its aggression and short-sightedness towards Muslims, which may have been untenable for Turkey (Aviv 2019). But this point also requires some scrutiny. If anything, sustaining positive relations with Israel might have enabled Turkey to provide assurances to Israel and the latter’s policies towards its neighbors and Muslim minorities, or simply to mitigate its activities in Northern Iraq. It is difficult to envisage any kind of path dependence that leads from the absence of common security interests to opprobrium in international fora, the flotilla incident, and temporary severance of relations.
A better explanation (see figure 4.) lies in the transformation of the Turkish state. Institutions that restrained foreign policy lost their autonomy with the emergence and consolidation of new foreign policy elites. Combined with a permissive international environment, the new elites could freely afford to antagonize an ally and engage in verbal hostility to increase their domestic and international support, but this would have unforeseen consequences that led to the termination of the alliance.

Figure 4. Explaining the termination of the alliance

Change in the Governing Elite

The new elite was a pact formed by societal actors often considered by the statist elites to be endangering Turkey’s modernization project. At its crux was a group of conservative politicians that had once formed the cadres of Islamist political movements that rejected secularism. They were supported by a professional class, the Anatolian bourgeoisie, (Burak 2011, 63) who were empowered not only by Turkey’s transition to a market economy after the 1982 coup, but also promoted by a conscious design by the military to inculcate against subversive (leftist) ideologies (Yavuz 1997, 30; Akman 2004). This “pro-Islamic elite gradually continue[d] to move into the higher echelons of the economy, cultural sphere, and bureaucracy… [beginning to] influence state policies” (Yavuz 1997, 32). In the aftermath of the 28th February Coup, the Welfare Party closed and was replaced by the Virtue Party. The party failed to emulate the success of its predecessor and was split in two amidst the confusion caused by discussions over its future direction.
The reformist elements within the party coalesced to form AKP, which positioned itself as a moderate party espousing an alternative view of modernization that would eschew Refah’s extremism, prioritizing political survival ahead of its lofty goal of transforming Turkish society. To this end, they supported the advancement of Turkey's democracy, its EU vocation, and its Western-orientation. This party went on to win the general elections in November 2002 and establish itself as a single-party government, which was a first in many years. In the by-election the following year, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former mayor of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, became prime minister. Erdoğan was a controversial figure and had served time in jail for anti-secular remarks. The party, however, was said to have taken on a moderate stance on these issues, which earned them appelations like ‘Islamic liberals’ or ‘strategic modernists’ (Hale and Özbudun 2010, 9). In any case, the Party’s position was opposed to the statist elite and its ‘mission to civilize’ Turkish society. In this the AKP has been remarkably successful in critiquing the old establishment and putting controversial issues on the agenda.

It was also successful in gaining allies across a wide range of networks including intellectuals, businessmen, and bureaucrats. However, the election of the AKP exacerbated the religious-secularist, old-elite vs. new elite, conflict in Turkey. As such, the first term of the AKP pitted the emerging elite against the old establishment. m. Despite concerns over the AKP’s Islamist roots, their conduct of foreign policy, especially pursuing EU membership, generally garnered support by the old elites. After the second electoral victory, the AKP can be said to have gained the upper hand over the military. Turkish foreign policy in this period was becoming more assertive and pro-active. It also coincided with the rise of Abdullah Gül, a key player in both the REFAHYOL coalition government (made up of the Welfare and True Path Parties) and the first AKP government in which he served as the Minister of Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs respectively, becoming the head of state in 2007.
Institutional Change and the Consolidation of the New Elites

Turkey experienced significant changes to its bifurcated political system after the AKP assumed power (Keyman 2010, 313). While many institutional changes were achieved through the initiative and restraint of the old elites, pact-making by the new elites and extra-legal confrontations exacerbated inter-elite conflict and, ultimately engendered the domestic power transition. In the context of Turkey’s EU vocation in the early years of the AKP, there appeared to be a consensus around the necessity of implementing principles such as the Copenhagen Criteria, which necessitated a genuine civilianization of Turkish politics (Çelenk 2009, 128) and political liberalization.

Concerning the political wherewithal of the Turkish Armed Forces, the military seemed torn. While a conservative group consisting of cold warriors feared that Turkey’s modernization project could be undone, a progressive, “gradualist” faction was willing to let history run its course (Aydınlı 2011, 230-1). Numerous reforms were undertaken with the consent of the military. For example, in July 2003, the government introduced the Seventh EU Harmonization Package to reduce the influence of the Turkish military. These included parliamentary oversight in the approval of the military’s budget, promoting transparency in government and, perhaps most significantly, changes in the NSC. Throughout the year, various amendments were made. In January 2003, the composition of the NSC was extended to include more civilian officials who could be invited depending on the agenda. In August of that year, Article 4 of the Law of the NSC, which delineates the duties of the Council, was amended to reflect the now advisory nature of the Council as envisaged by the amended Article 118 of the Constitution. Article 5 now called for bimonthly meetings, and the NSC would henceforth convene at the behest of the President or Prime Minister, not the Chief of Staff.
Another noteworthy amendment was the removal of Article 9, which stated that the NSC had the right to submit to the president or prime minister inquiries regarding the execution of measures and policies recommended by the NSC. With this critical change, Turkish governments were no longer accountable to the NSC. Under Article 13, the NSC once enjoyed the right to administer, coordinate, and oversee a wide variety of governmental discharges such as national security policies, management of the defense industry, and allocation of funds to matters of the NSC. As of July 2003, Article 13 stated that the NSC would be responsible only for its own “secretariat services [and] the duties given by… the relevant laws.” Also, Article 19 on Documents and Information was repealed, meaning that ministries and other public offices were no longer required to disclose information and classified documents at the behest of the NSC. Finally, the NSC’s funds and other military expenditures fell under the scrutiny of the Court of Accounts ( Çağaptay 2003).

Institutional changes were not limited to voluntary legal amendments as Turkey’s inter-elite conflict reached its twilight in the 2007-2008 period. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a staunch secularist who vetoed many AKP bills reached the end of his tenure in 2007. The AKP nominated for the position Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, however the required parliamentary majority eluded the AKP. Turkey’s statist elites could not remain indifferent. In April, a so-called e-memorandum was published on the Turkish Armed Forces website at the behest of Chief of Staff Yasar Büyükanıt. The message raised concerns over secularism and that the Turkish Armed Forces would continue to protect the secular nature of the Republic – a thinly veiled threat against the presidential candidate, whose wife wore a veil – a symbol of political Islam. The public reacted to the ultimatum by the military as the AKP called a snap election in July 2007 and won in a landslide. With greater domestic legitimacy and more seats in parliament, Gul was elected President in August 2007.
In desperation, the old elites made a final move in the Constitutional Court, where the AKP was tried for becoming a focal point for anti-secular activities, and the party was threatened with closure. While the Court confirmed that the AKP was indeed a focal point for anti-secular activities, the party was merely given a fine – the equivalent of a yellow card. Having survived, the new elite rallied to deliver an extra-legal coup de grace. The same summer witnessed the beginning of the Ergenekon trials wherein a number of ex-military officers, high-ranking active officers, and a number of public figures including academics and journalists were charged with conspiring to bring down the Turkish government, resulting in the arrests of hundreds of officers, journalists, and academics.

**New Foreign Policy Actors**

Having displaced so many key figures in positions of power and influence but lacking the human resources to operate them, the AKP had to seize power by way of establishing an encompassing pact of supporters to overcome the challenges posed by the statist elite. This precipitated a strategic partnership between the AKP and the Gülen Movement (Yavuz and Koç 2016; Taş 2018), which later came to be known as the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ). Based in the U.S. following the February 28, 1997 coup, Gülen is a cleric whose organization operated schools and charitable foundations around the world but exercised significant political influence through clandestine networks within state institutions like the police force and judiciary, which were responsible for purging, on false charges, Turkey’s old elites from institutions like the military.

Institutional restructuring and the elite power transition did not take place in a social vacuum. The Anatolian bourgeoisie were among the major economic actors, along with

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3 This appellation was adopted in Turkish parlance after Gülenist elements that had infiltrated the Armed Forces attempted a military coup on July 15, 2016.
various social organizations, that found more space in which to operate (Burak 2011, 67). By also aligning themselves with the AKP government, a variety of businesses and business associations like MUSIAD (Muslim Businessmen Association) and TUSKON (Turkish Businessmen and Industrialists Association) began to enjoy a privileged partnership with the government. Turkey’s foreign policy under the AKP emphasized economic and trade relations, often utilizing soft power (Kirişçi 2009) due to their influence. Turkey’s economic activism in the Middle East, for instance, was driven by “a shared world view, informal personal networks and overlapping roles” (Tür 2011, 591). The business-state relationship has been most evident in the activities of joint-state-private ventures, which are prominent features of the Turkish economy. One notable example of this is Turkish Airlines, which by proliferating its activities around the world, especially in the Middle East and Africa, has arguably become a major soft-power and foreign policy instrument for Turkey (Selçuk 2013). Evidence also suggests that there was a strong correlation between the presence of Gülenist assets like schools, the proliferation of Turkish Airlines flights, and the AKP’s foreign policy agenda, especially towards Africa (Özkan 2013, 50-51).

Aside from business groups, think-tanks and non-governmental organizations have also lent support to the AKP.⁴ Civil society actors have also become a source of input for foreign policy. As Öniş (2011) notes, civil society participation in policymaking has increased along with their influence in foreign policy. For instance, there has been a proliferation of think-tanks under the AKP. Often said to have close ties to the AKP government, SETA (Foundation for Economic, Political, and Social Research) is a notable example of a think-tank actively involved in shaping Turkish foreign policy. SETA’s line of thinking is

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⁴ These most notably include think-tanks such as SETAV and NGOs such as Deniz Feneri Derneği (Lighthouse Foundation) and IHH (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), which took center stage at the Mavi Marmara incident on May 30, 2010.
remarkably consistent with that of the government in that it promotes Turkey’s activism in the region as well as closer ties in the neighborhood (Aras 2009).

Beyond their desire to consolidate domestic power and pursue commercial interests, it is difficult to pinpoint a definitive policy agenda (foreign or otherwise) among the new elite, especially after Turkey’s failed EU membership bid in 2005. Understanding the new elites’ foreign policy agenda necessitates a more in-depth examination of individuals in positions of institutional power, like then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who deserves special mention here due to his ability to define the worldview of the new elite. His foreign policy program proved persuasive, whereas his predecessors failed due to their inability to articulate a reasonably coherent foreign policy vision that transcended simplistic anti-imperialism (Özkan 2015, 120). Davutoğlu was an academic who was snubbed and ostracized in the “old” Turkey due to his critical stance against Turkey’s old elite and their modernization program along republican values, which he considered as having inflicted trauma on a Muslim society by forcing it to become the periphery of the West. He rose through the AKP ranks quickly, first as a foreign policy adviser, later foreign minister and, eventually, becoming Turkey’s prime minister.

As outlined in Davutoğlu’s *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, the new elites’ foreign policy program lies at the intersection of quaint geopolitical principles, liberal values, and socio-historical linkages. Owing to its strategic location and historical ties, Turkey should become a central country (*Mittellage*) that pursues an active foreign policy in order to assume leadership roles in multiple regions/basins. In this formulation, Turkey would have to balance democracy and security interests, promote regional cooperation and dialogue, and engage in ‘rhythmic diplomacy,’ in what was known as the ‘zero problems with neighbors policy’ (Demirağ and Özpek 2012). Many of these principles were used in the AKP's election manifestos (Yanık 2012, 217). For example, Davutoğlu advocated deepening
relations with the Middle East, while also promoting foreign aid donations, as evidenced by Turkey's growing economic links with Middle Eastern states. In practice, however, internal contradictions only brought about “all azimuthal hostility” (Karmon 2011). One contradiction concerned Israel. Despite the lofty rhetoric of zero problems, Davutoğlu not only problematized Turkey's immediate recognition of Israeli independence in 1949 but also considered Israel to be an artificial state constituting a ‘tumor’ in the Middle East (Özkan 2015, 128-9).

Reformulating the National Interest

Israel’s demotion from a valuable strategic asset to a ‘tumor’ occurred under the tenure of Turkey’s new elites. Under the old elites, alliance with Israel was used to discredit emerging domestic rivals, but the new elite chose the opposite path. It comes as no surprise that tensions between Turkey and Israel, discursive and otherwise, reached their peak after the new elite consolidated power in 2007. The recurring theme, however, is that Turkey’s national interest in this period was hardly informed by geopolitical or external security considerations. As in the 1990s, Turkey’s external security environment was permissive: there were no obvious inter-state threats that would obviate any balancing moves beyond Iran’s nuclear aspirations, but even Iran was desecuritized, and Turkey elected to support its peaceful nuclear program at the UNSC due to lack of any societal objection (Gürsel and Ersoy 2012). Absent tangible threats, domestic institutions, and elites often have a freer hand in choosing a foreign policy informed by their parochial preferences. In the 1990s, the old elite chose to align with Israel. Upon capturing state institutions and consolidating power, the new elites elected a confrontational approach.

There were several reasons for Turkey’s mercurial attitude, but it essentially boils down to the fact that Turkey’s traditional, institutional, sources of foreign policy like the military and the civilian bureaucracy, had lost the power to enforce a restrained foreign policy
consistent with their socialization and the Kemalist modernization program. The new elites also had a different foreign policy software, due to their different professional backgrounds and worldviews informed by the writings of people like Davutoğlu.

A prescient reminder from Snyder (1991) is that powerful elite coalitions can proliferate myths about the strategic utility of a foreign policy (especially, expansionist ones). Propagating the myth of Israel as a source of disorder in, and rival to, an otherwise Turkey-centric and peaceful regional order not only compensated for the absence of an external rival but proved to be a popular domestic myth. While Turkish voters are generally un-swayed by non-economic issues (Yanık 2012, 224), this did not prevent prominent figures like Erdoğan from heavily referencing Israel in his election campaigns and speeches. Meanwhile, condemning Israel in major international fora may have been profitable as a populist tool for domestic mobilization as well (Öniş 2011, 50-51; Altunışık and Martin, 2011), and one that could be exacerbated by the personal qualities of a leader like Erdoğan (Görener and Uçar 2011). Even before Davos and Mavi Marmara, Turkey failed to successfully facilitate talks between Israel and Syria due to Israel’s execution of Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in 2008. Erdoğan considered this Israeli move as a personal affront.

Erdogan’s outburst at the Davos Summit in 2009 also shows that myths can appeal to target international audiences as evidenced by the praise Erdogan received from the Arab world, not to mention the hero’s welcome he received from cheering crowds upon returning to Turkey. “This was a matter of the esteem and prestige of my country. Hence, my reaction had to be clear. I could not have allowed anyone to poison the prestige and in particular the honor of my country” (Bendern 2009). In other words, elevating the myth of Israel as a threat was one of the adhesives that the new elite used to maintain social control and possibly fulfill personal goals.
This narrative about myths is substantiated by quantitative evidence as well. Turkey and Israel had dense levels of verbal and material interactions after the inception of the alliance. As the AKP came to power, and the new elite eventually consolidated power, we can observe a palpable overtime increase in material and verbal conflict between the two countries, as seen in figure 5 below. Verbal and material conflict were present even in the early stages of the relationship, but these represented inconsequential (thanks, again, to the power of the old elite) actors. By contrast, there was no conceivable reason for restraint to be necessary. Instead, a newly consolidated elite, firmly in control of key national institutions, buoyed by electoral success, and facing no credible domestic and institutional constraint could afford to play populism domestically and internationally.

Figure 5. Material and Verbal Conflict/Cooperation between Turkey and Israel 1991-2012 (Tüzün and Biltekin 2013, 56).

The new elites may have suffered from a case of blowback as verbal hostility conspired with new foreign policy actors from Turkey’s civil society into forming a volatile mix. After Davos, relations had been declining as Israel’s participation in the “Anatolian Eagle” air exercise was canceled in October 2009. The Turkish public and media let their intentions be known. The airing of an anti-Israeli drama series on the Turkish Radio and Television
Corporation also added to the tension. In January 2010, another crisis took place. During a meeting, the Turkish Ambassador to Tel-Aviv, Oğuz Çelikkol, was engineered to sit on a lower chair as a way of humiliating Turkey. The relationship reached its nadir in May 2010 when a ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, full of activists bound for the Gaza Strip was intercepted by the IDF. In the ensuing struggle, nine Turkish citizens lost their lives. The flotilla incident was the final trigger for the collapse of the alliance. Several international inquiries were conducted into the matter. In the meantime, the sides could not be reconciled despite pressures from the U.S. Soon after Turkey added Israel as a threat to its National Security Document, the so-called Red Book. In September 2011, Turkey terminated its military relations with Israel and suspended 16 ongoing military contracts. Concomitantly, Turkey downgraded its diplomatic relations to second-secretary level while Israel withdrew its ambassador from Turkey.

Verbal conflict is at the crux of the matter because it shows that the breakdown of the alliance occurred at the intersection of a permissive international environment and the instrumental use of discourses by the newly consolidated elite who were not beholden to any institutional restraint. The new elites, since then have relied on expanding commercial relations, which even a simple glance at the trade volume between the two countries (figure 6 below) reveals as being on an upward trajectory. After Turkish-Israeli relations reached their nadir following the *Mavi Marmara* Incident, diplomatic normalization efforts began in 2016. In the aftermath of the incident, Turkey is faced a more-restrictive international environment due not only to the loss of Israel as an ally and the loss of support from the powerful Israel lobby, but also with the emergence of new threats on its borders such as ISIS and the PYD. Per the expectations of the present theory, structural signals favored increased cooperation

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5 It is worth mentioning that the activists in question were members of the Turkish IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation), which Israeli sources argue had been aiding Hamas.
between Turkey and Israel. Unfortunately, a rapprochement failed to materialize as neither side trusted the other. Even today, it seems unlikely for the Turkish-Israeli alliance to reemerge, structural conditions are increasingly favorable for improving relations between Turkey and Israel as both countries have a mutual dislike for the Assad regime in Syria and both could benefit from cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean over energy issues, although Israel has considerably more alliance options as compared to Turkey.

Figure 6. Trade volume between Turkey and Israel 1990-2017 (WTO Statistics)

CONCLUSION

This study has two theoretical implications. Firstly, the key to understanding alliance policy in contemporary democratizing states relies on understanding sources of restraint: be they from the international system or originating from domestic institutions. Where external security is comparatively plentiful and foreign policy executives are freer to explore different security options, decision-makers will likely privilege domestic and parochial interests. This is especially true when institutions traditionally dominated by statist elites, like the military in the case of Turkey, can no longer enforce foreign policy restraint. Given the changing nature of domestic institutions, the preferences of key individuals, rather than the exogenously-assumed threat perceptions of states, are needed to understand alliance dynamics in the contemporary world. This necessity is compounded in cases where traditional elite-institutional structures break down due to the emergence of new influential actors.
The second implication is that internal structural transformations in the form of elite change and institutional capture, the addition of new actors, articulation of new identities and interests, the creation of new bases of legitimacy, and the instrumentalization of the state, point to the trans-nationalization of alliance behavior. We can see this not only in the economic expansion of non-state actors but more importantly, in the examples of the IHH and Mavi Marmara incident, which illustrates how activists can bring countries to the brink of war. Domestic power transitions can lead therefore lead to alliance failure, which is a finding that calls into question the relevance of minimalist, structural statist models in explaining foreign policy. The neoclassical realist framework of analysis utilized in this article, meanwhile, can helpfully capture the vicissitudes of alliance behavior despite changing domestic and international circumstances.

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