

# THE U.S. SECURITY STRATEGY AND THE ROLE OF TURKEY IN THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

*Ever since the Iraq War disrupted the regional balance of power, a fundamentally new geopolitical reality has been emerging in the Middle East. As the U.S. winds down its military presence in Iraq, it must confront this new reality, and decide what kind of grand strategy it will henceforth apply to the region. In this respect, the most promising development it can seize upon is the rapidly emerging role of Turkey as a leading regional political, economic and diplomatic power. As with any rising power, this process will generate occasional tensions with the United States, as seen recently over Iranian nuclear sanctions and the Israeli flotilla incident. But the United States should not lose sight of the overwhelming long-term advantages of Turkey's greater prominence in the Middle East, which is likely to facilitate integration with the global economy, support peaceful modes of conflict resolution and encourage accommodation between Islamic and Western liberal political norms.*

**Scott A. Field and Dariush Zahedi\***



\* Scott A. Field is lecturer in National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey and a visiting fellow at the Institute of International Studies, University of California Berkeley. Dariush Zahedi is lecturer at the Department of Political Science at University of California.

### ***A New Geopolitical Reality***

**F**ollowing the demise of America's two most recent approaches to managing the Middle East—the Bush Doctrine of regional transformation and the Clinton strategy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran—U.S. grand strategy in the region is adrift. The Bush Doctrine fell spectacularly at the first hurdle with the failure to stabilize Iraq and transform it into a U.S. client. The notion of intimidating the region's rejectionists into submission using on-ground displays of military power has been an unequivocal failure. This is nowhere better illustrated today than in Damascus, where Bashar al-Assad—by this time supposed to either have surrendered or been swept from power—is keeping a diary full of diplomatic appointments—and Tehran, where the regime relishes the opportunity to herald its unrelenting pursuit of mastery over the nuclear fuel cycle.

As it collapsed, the Bush Doctrine also put to rest any chance of returning to Clinton's policy of dual containment. The border between Iran and Iraq used to be the Middle East's version of an iron curtain, dividing the power centers of the Shia Persian world and the Sunni Arab world. This convenient fulcrum allowed Reagan and Bush 41 to play Iran and Iraq against each other in a strategy of balancing; and later reassured Clinton that his policy of seeking to isolate and transform both nations into feeble regional actors would not end up pushing them together into a rogue axis.

That iron curtain no longer exists. The moment Saddam's regime fell, a wave of exiled political leaders and militias, military and intelligence agents, pilgrims and businessmen from Iran flooded into Iraq and generated a dense network of political, military, cultural and economic linkages across the now-porous border. By the time the U.S. awoke to the fact that it had blundered into a deadly vortex of insurgency, civil war, terrorism and state failure, Iran had effectively sunk its claws into Iraq. It gleefully accepted the extraordinary geopolitical gift of the U.S. using its military power to sponsor the creation of the world's first Shia Arab state. Overnight its degree of influence inside its erstwhile enemy expanded by orders of magnitude, giving it a bridgehead into the Arab world, one that it could never have forged alone.

Thus through a border that was once a brick wall, Iran now enjoys a gateway to influence in the Arab world. This is not to say that Iraq is an Iranian client state, or that it ever will be; Iraqi nationalism is too fierce and deeply embedded for that, whatever the newfound Shia sense of fraternity. But the significance of the reversal from bitter enmity to cautious friendship between Iran and Iraq cannot be over-emphasized; it is the single most significant geopolitical change wrought from the Iraq War, and the defining feature of the "new Middle East" towards which the U.S. must now formulate a grand strategy.

Most significantly, this turnaround has rendered the containment of Iran extremely difficult. Aware of Iran's greater reach and rising influence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories as well as the unabated quest on the part of the Islamic Republic for nuclear capability, America's Gulf allies are clearly apprehensive about the rise of Iran. So much so, in fact, that some Sunni Arab leaders may even privately welcome bombing raids on the part of Israel and/or the U.S. against Iran's nuclear and military installations. The more enlightened and far-sighted leaders recognize, however, that such strikes will only present a temporary setback to Iran's nuclear ambitions, unify Iranians behind their increasingly unpopular regime, bring about the unraveling of Iran's potentially formidable opposition movement, and prompt the country to leave the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and weaponize its nuclear program in short order. Moreover, with American naval and military bases scattered throughout their coastlines and territories, the hereditary rulers of Persian Gulf sheikhdoms recognize that they could easily get caught in the crossfire between Iran and the U.S., should the Islamic Republic's radicalized military chiefs decide to retaliate against the interests of the U.S. and its allies.

The Gulf states, therefore, have sought to establish a *modus vivendi* with Iran, recognizing that the Iraq War has made greater Iranian influence a permanent political feature of the new Middle East. They would be prepared to directly confront Iran only in an extreme situation, for example if Iran were to emulate Saddam Hussein's military adventurism and directly threaten their survival. This is an eventuality the U.S. must reaffirm an unswerving commitment to guard against; but given the regional gains Iran can continue to reap without firing a shot, it is also a rather remote one.

The quest for influence in the new Iraq and the new Middle East is thus primarily a diplomatic game. The most pressing task facing the U.S. is to use its diplomatic resources within Iraq and the rest of the region to rebuild its battered reputation and flagging influence, and thus regain some of the ground the Iraq War surrendered to Iran. This will not be easy; Iran, and other regional actors such as Turkey, which has also vastly extended its influence inside Iraq since the war, enjoys great natural advantages through their historical and cultural ties, superior ability to navigate local politics and the capability to wield influence through local proxies. Indeed, the ability of Turkey and especially Iran to influence developments inside Iraq is likely to become further enhanced in the aftermath of the impending departure of American combat troops from Iraq.

There is also no escaping the fact that one of the key consequences of introducing democracy to the country has been to reduce the U.S. to just one of many players competing for influence within Iraq's new political arena. It will out-compete

its rivals only to the extent it manages to establish a reputation for pursuing its interests with sensitivity and respect for local concerns, and fostering security and prosperity for ordinary Iraqis. As the shoe-throwing climax of the SOFA negotiation well illustrated, however, this will be a thankless and Sisyphean task, requiring every ounce of the diplomatic resources that can be packed into the world's largest embassy. But the future standing and influence of the U.S. in the region depend critically upon it.

This standing and influence will also continue to depend on the U.S. disposition towards the issue that 99 percent of respondents to a recent survey of the Arab world place in their top five priorities: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Obama administration is already preparing the ground for taking important steps with regard to the Arab Israeli conflict in order to repair America's tattered reputation in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The president has adamantly refused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's insistence on the necessity of solving Iran's nuclear impasse prior to focusing on the festering Palestinian problem, maintaining instead that they should be pursued in tandem. The president appears to believe that one of the most effective means for rehabilitating the image of the U.S., undercutting the influence of Iran and its proxies, and undermining support for al-Qaeda brand terrorism is the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Demonstrating his commitment to this objective, he has publicly rebuked the Israeli government for its policy of expanding settlements in East Jerusalem, and, significantly, appears to have embraced General David Petraeus' assertion that the absence of progress towards the resolution of the Arab Israeli dispute contributes to the undermining of the safety and security of American servicemen stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq. To underscore the point that a key component in the fight against extremism and terrorism is the removal of the conditions that fuel it, and in sharp departure from all of his predecessors, President Obama has even gone so far as to refer to the resolution of the Arab Israeli dispute as being vital to the national security interest of the U.S.

### ***A New (Old) Strategy: Offshore Balancing***

President Obama has correctly identified the resolution of the long festering Israeli Palestinian problem as a key factor in enhancing America's ability to promote its interests in the area. This, however, is a monumental task, with multiple dimensions, over which the U.S. can exert only limited control. In light of such limitations, what other steps can the U.S. take, and what is the best grand strategy for supporting America's efforts at enhancing its standing and influence in the Middle East?

The first principle should be to recognize that having large numbers of American troops active in the region is counterproductive. U.S. troops on Arabian soil put the early wind in Al Qaeda's sails, and will continue to hand extremists a recruiting tool for so long as they remain. Housing large numbers of U.S. troops with solid allies like Japan is uncomfortable enough, as recent events in Okinawa demonstrate. In the Middle East it is far more problematic, and if pursued would breed a steady deterioration in the relationship between the U.S. military and local communities. The constant risk and eventual statistical certainty of cultural transgressions by U.S. personnel mean that resentment and tension among local communities are bound to increase over time. The U.S. should resist the temptation to do anything more than retain sufficient troops in Iraq and Kuwait to deter an outbreak of ethnic or sectarian violence while the new Iraqi government is being formed and stabilized. Beyond the modest numbers currently stationed in Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the logistical advantages in rapid deployment gained by having large numbers of troops in the region are outweighed by the costs, at a moment when the U.S. is best served by keeping a low military profile.

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The U.S. must, to be sure, reaffirm an unequivocal commitment to the security of the Persian Gulf, its primary and enduring national interest in the region, as set out in the Carter Doctrine 30 years ago. But this can be comfortably achieved without large numbers of troops on the ground; the firepower projected by having two or three carrier strike groups in or close by the region is ample to deter any adventurism by regional actors. It should be remembered that the key threat to U.S. interests, namely a closure of the Straits of Hormuz, would be equally if not more detrimental to Iran, and is consequently unlikely. The other key security challenge, keeping pressure on Iran over its nuclear program, is also not advanced by a large U.S. troop presence; Iran knows full well that the U.S. is not in any position to contemplate a land invasion. At the same time, the U.S. troop presence in Iran's near abroad undermines anti-nuclear efforts by giving the Iranian regime a pretext for domestic fear mongering that bolsters internal support for the nuclear program. The other conceivable scenario, in which unilateral Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities draw the U.S. into a conflict, would also involve not ground forces but

rather bombing sorties and missile strikes, which again falls within the domain of the U.S. Navy's carrier strike groups. U.S. ground troops could contribute nothing to this effort, and indeed would be a liability by simply providing a target for Iranian retaliation.

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In short, U.S. regional security strategy should revert to "offshore balancing": leaving the lightest possible footprint on the ground, while reaffirming the Carter Doctrine and its solid commitment to protect regional allies and swiftly reversing any military aggression that threatens the flow of Persian Gulf oil. This would reduce financial burdens, minimize the risks to U.S. personnel, deprive extremists of a recruiting tool and Iran of a pretext for weaponizing its nuclear program, while still comfortably meeting U.S. security commitments in the region. It would also free U.S. diplomats to focus on the real task at hand

for the U.S. in the Middle East: rebuilding its diplomatic influence and constructing a security architecture that stabilizes the region and sets it on the path to economic prosperity and political liberalization.

### ***The Critical Role of Turkey in the New Middle East***

One legacy of the Iraq War is that the Middle East is now balanced uncomfortably between two worlds: the old bargain struck by the U.S., of tolerating repressive autocrats as long as they provided stability; and the new vision of the Bush Doctrine, in which democracy and free markets would transform the region's rejectionism and economic despair into global integration, prosperity, as well as socio-political openness and pluralism. Whatever the failures of the Iraq War, one of its fragile achievements has been to open a window of opportunity for Iraq to begin moving itself, and the region, toward the more propitious of these two options. Of course, backsliding towards a more humane version of Saddam-style autocracy dominated by a sectarian elite remains a distinct possibility, as does reversion to prolonged Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict, this time accompanied by an equally devastating ethnic bloodbath between Kurds and Arabs. But the U.S. needs to do all it can to nudge Iraq and the region in the opposite direction. To do so it will need to stabilize Iraq politically and economically, and work to consolidate and spread its gains regionally. This, in return requires a concerted effort to finally build for the

Middle East a coherent and effective regional security architecture. In this task, one regional partner stands head and shoulders above all others in its importance: Turkey.

Turkey possesses a number of unique qualities that make it indispensable to the United States as a partner for pursuing its interests in the Middle East. It is 99 percent Muslim and is currently ruled by a political party with Islamist roots (the Justice and Development Party - AKP); but remains a fiercely secular democracy. It has warm relations with all Arab states of the region as well as Iran; but also maintains (if increasingly tenuously) a military alliance with Israel. Its cultural roots lie in Central Asia and the Middle East; yet it has been a staunch Western ally in NATO for six decades and a longtime candidate for EU membership. Turkey thus bridges all the cultural and political divides that make it difficult for the U.S. to operate in the Middle East. Its influence is currently being welcomed by the Arab states as a moderate counterweight to Iran inside Iraq and throughout the region. It also has clout; it possesses one of the largest militaries in NATO and is a major economic power, as recognized in its membership of the G-20. Most significant of all, the primary foreign policy focus of its current government is to deepen its political and economic engagement across the Middle East. Of all the countries currently seeking to exploit the regional vacuum created by the Iraq War, in the long term Turkey is easily the best placed to succeed. Ten years hence if any country is likely to have greatly increased its economic and political influence as well as its soft power across the region, it will be Turkey. The U.S. would be well advised to ride on its coat-tails.

The essence of what Turkey has to offer the U.S. in the Middle East is embodied in the narrative of its immediate past and how it has, especially since the ascendancy of the AKP in 2002, been attempting to reconcile the conflicting forces that have bedeviled the Middle East since the region's encounter with European modernity, namely secularism, Islam, democracy and economic development. In the 1980s it undertook IMF-mandated economic reforms that lifted it out of chronic economic and political instability, powered by the rise of an entrepreneurial middle class. This bourgeoisie was made up of predominantly conservative Anatolian Muslims, who formed the constituency that brought the AKP to power in 2002, and gave them an even more sweeping mandate in 2007. The secularist and military elite thus disenfranchised (which had hitherto arrogated onto itself a monopoly on the comprehension, interpretation and enforcement of the legacy of Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic) have pushed back strongly against the alleged threat to secularism and democracy posed by the AKP's Islamist leanings, but found themselves outflanked by the AKP's stronger economic credentials and robust commitment to the human rights and political reform requirements set down by the EU. Western values are no longer abstract; they are made concrete by the

Copenhagen criteria for accession to the EU. In pursuit of the political high ground they represent, the AKP has labored to make civil liberties, minority rights for the Kurdish population, civilian control of the military, and development of the free market embedded features of Turkish political life.<sup>1</sup>

In short, a Muslim political party has come to power democratically on the back of a rising Muslim middle class engaged with the international economy and by promoting Western values. This is precisely the model promoted in the lofty rhetoric of the Bush Freedom Agenda, but which the U.S. so conspicuously had no actual capacity to produce. Turkey is both willing and able to promote this model throughout the Middle East, and the U.S. should back it strongly in doing so.

Where Turkey is most vital to regional order is in Iraq. Although it suffered economically from the first Iraq War, and due to PKK terrorism after second, it has now turned the politically troubling emergence of a strong Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) into an economic opportunity. In 2009 Turkish companies and businessmen, many of them aligned with the AK Party and the faith based Gülen Movement, conducted 12 billion dollars worth of business with the KRG; in 2010 that figure is projected to rise to 20 billion dollars. The lure of economic prosperity thus generated provides the best hope for weaning the KRG away from its temptation to fight for Kirkuk and other disputed territories it seized in 2003, and to curb its dangerous ambitions to declare independence.

The KRG has long been the success story of Iraq, and the best way to consolidate it is to convince the Kurds that they will be better off by compromising with the Arabs on disputed territories, reining in the PKK and pursuing a brighter economic future in the Turkish orbit. Adding to the economic incentives Turkey is already providing, the AKP has also risked substantial political capital in a bold initiative to reconcile with Turkey's own Kurdish population and thus take the wind out of the separatists' sails. In November 2009, the AKP government announced it would take a dramatic step towards political normalization with the KRG by opening a consulate in Erbil. It is entirely in the U.S. interest and the interests of regional stability that such initiatives succeed.

Turkey is also pursuing political and economic engagement elsewhere in Iraq and the region. It played a central role in crucial political negotiations such as the SOFA, and more recently the legal framework for upcoming national elections. It has mediated peace talks between Israel and Syria, and was involved in negotiations

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<sup>1</sup> Dariush Zahedi and Gökhan Bacık, "Kemalism Is Dead, Long Live Kemalism: How the AKP Became Atatürk's Last Defender", *Foreign Affairs*, 23 April 2010.

in Doha that halted the slide towards civil war in Lebanon in May 2008. In October last year it dispatched ministers to Baghdad to sign a package of 48 cooperation deals with Iraq, a feat replicated in Damascus around the same time. It has clinched free trade deals with Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Israel, is seeking one with the GCC and its exports into the region are now set to swell even further beyond the 31 billion dollars achieved in 2008. It already plays a pivotal role in regional energy security, acting as a transit state for oil and gas from Iraq, Iran and Azerbaijan to European markets, and the proposed Nabucco pipeline could bring further countries into the loop. All this has generated tremendous momentum behind Turkey's push into the region, which promises to turn the attention of regional actors from conflict to commerce and diplomatic resolution of disputes, and thus act as a stabilizing force for the future. In a region that has an average 60 percent of the population under 30, with huge and growing unemployment problems as well as numerous unresolved territorial, ethnic, nationalist, ideological, and political disputes, it comes not a moment too soon.

Despite the many positives Turkey brings to the table, its growing influence is not welcomed in some quarters in Washington. Common complaints include that its government has Islamist leanings, is too close to Iran and Syria, and has increasingly strained relations with America's close ally Israel. These facts do introduce some tension into the relationship, and inevitably create some distance. But the fact is that if the U.S. wishes to make any headway in the Middle East, such distance is precisely what it needs in a regional partner. In a region where suspicion of American motives is endemic, willingness to work with a partner that has an independent foreign policy accurately tuned to the broad moderate majority of Middle Eastern opinion (for whom the factors listed above are as much virtues as vices) is the best way to regain credibility. It is infinitely harder for conspiracy theorists on the Arab street to argue that a Turkey led by the AKP, with its Islamist roots and democratic credentials, is simply a stooge promoting U.S. imperial designs.

If the U.S. wants to work with clients that reinforce the rut of anti-Americanism and violent extremism that its partnerships with Arab autocrats and uncritical support of Israel have dug for it over the past 40 years, it can simply revert to its previous patterns of engagement. If, however, it would like an interlocutor that is a dynamic rising power capable of spreading prosperity to every corner of the region, demonstrating the concrete benefits of international economic engagement and projecting Western democratic values as it does so, then Turkey would be the partner of choice. It reaches across the region's barriers and offers an actual working model for a way out of the Arab (and Middle Eastern) predicament, a task that Iran's Shia makeup and revolutionary zeal disqualifies it from, Israel's inability to resolve its conflict with the Palestinians prevent it from addressing, and which is simply beyond the reach of the sclerotic Arab autocracies.

In the aftermath of the failure of President George W. Bush's attempts at spreading socio-political openness as well as economic liberalization and integration to the Middle East through coercive means, President Obama's yearning to revert to the more familiar principle of *realpolitik* as the guiding principle of American foreign policy is understandable. However, the President would be well-advised not to abandon the strategic objective of prodding Middle Eastern nations to become more integrated into the global economy and finally starting a Fourth Wave of Democratization. A more prosperous, open, and economically integrated Middle East, capable of creating gainful employment for the massive army of young men and women poised to enter the region's job market, would undermine the ability of extremists to gain new adherents and expand their social base. In other words, President Bush and his neo-conservative advisors were not incorrect in diagnosing the primary causes contributing to the economic deprivation and political underdevelopment of the Middle East. Indeed, a group of Arab intellectuals responsible for publishing the Arab Human Development Reports had come to a similar conclusion back in 2002. Where Bush and his advisors blundered was the selection of the means through which they sought to generate the desired transformations.

By helping to open the closed and stagnant economies of Middle Eastern states (without infringing upon the principles of non-interference and sovereignty that are viewed as sacrosanct by Middle Eastern leaders), Turkey can contribute to the creation of the requisite conditions and constituencies that will, in the long run, pave the way for the transition to enduring democracies in the Middle East. Although in the short term the bulk of the benefits of economic opening are likely to get concentrated in the hands of the entourage of the sheikhs and presidents-for-life, such an opening can also spawn the creation of a bourgeoisie. History suggests that this middle class, whose livelihood will be dependant upon the global economy, will shun extremist policies that endanger its economic interests, even as it paves the way for greater social and economic interaction with the outside world.

Turkey, then, can play an indispensable role in promoting a freedom and prosperity agenda conducive both to the advancement of the interests of the people of the Middle East as well as the government of the U.S. However, the greatest obstacle to U.S.-Turkish cooperation is perhaps the catastrophic downturn in Turkish public opinion towards the U.S. that resulted from the Iraq War. In 2000 U.S. popularity in Turkey was above 50 percent, but by 2003 it had plummeted close to single digits and has barely moved since. More than 70 percent of Turks recently said that U.S. foreign policy plays a negative role in the world (more than Pakistan, Russia and China) and a galling 40 percent regard the U.S. as an enemy state (twice the number in Russia). The cause of the resentment is simple enough; just as the U.S. was

preaching the need for unity in fighting terrorism, its war to pre-empt a largely fabricated threat in Iraq caused a tremendous upsurge in the very real threat posed to Turkey by the PKK. The hypocrisy of this stance was, unsurprisingly, not lost on the Turkish public. America's unconditional support for virtually all of the policy decisions of the Israeli government, particularly during the invasion of Gaza in 2008, also undermined the confidence of the Turkish public in the U.S. It was not until late 2008, with growing Turkish impatience and increasing cross-border military activity that the U.S. started taking a more pro-active role in addressing Turkish concerns and began to turn the problem around. That President Obama chose Turkey as the first port of call in his charm offensive towards the Muslim world suggests he grasps the significance of the issue; his speech there was a useful first step in what should now become an unrelenting diplomatic effort to rebuild Turkish public confidence in U.S. foreign policy and thus facilitate official U.S.-Turkish cooperation.

No step would be more useful in this regard than initiating a new regional security architecture for the Middle East, with Turkey in a leadership role. With Iran closing in on a nuclear capability, Israel threatening to attack it unilaterally, Hizbullah rearmed with more advanced weaponry and its cadres itching for the next round with Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian problem festering on the brink of a Third Intifada, the prospect of a serious and coordinated outbreak of armed conflict across the region is real and growing. Now that the dust has settled on the Bush Administration's ill-fated attempt to solve the region's problems by forceful transformation, a new and comprehensive regional approach is urgently needed to push back against this trend. Rather than attempting to militarily dominate regional players into submission and impose a Pax Americana, the U.S. should instead seek to construct a framework within which all players in the region can engage in a realistic dialogue on the full range of their security and economic concerns. As Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen Stedman have argued in their book *Power and Responsibility*, the parallel political, economic and security tracks successfully pursued through the OSCE in Europe could provide a model.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual and Stephen John Stedman, *Power & Responsibility: Building International Order in an Era of Transnational Threats* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009)

With its ability to talk readily to all key players and offer them economic incentives in return for constructive actions, Turkey is the ideal interlocutor, peace-broker and catalyst. Both the EU and the U.S. could do much to revive their fortunes with the Turkish public –and more broadly in the Middle East– by backing its key role in a new regional security architecture.

### **Conclusion**

Consumed with massive economic problems at home and a costly war abroad in Afghanistan, the U.S. urgently needs a new strategy for the Middle East that will stabilize the region and bring U.S. commitments back in line with its capabilities. The Iraq War demonstrated the folly of the U.S. attempting to micromanage and arbitrate local politics in the Middle East. It was militarily costly, economically ruinous and politically counterproductive –but above all else simply unnecessary. As pointed out by John Mearsheimer, a prominent proponent of offshore balancing in the Middle East, the U.S. does not need to dominate the region militarily– it just needs to make sure that nobody else does.<sup>3</sup> This can be comfortably achieved with a strategy of offshore balancing that leaves a minimal footprint on the ground and thus dampens its terrorist problems at the same time. Transforming the Middle East is an urgent priority, but it is not a purely American responsibility; it is a shared one. The U.S. should acknowledge that it will never have the ability to navigate the regional political scene with the agility of a state like Turkey, and should encourage it to do the heavy lifting in terms of kickstarting economic integration and promoting a viable Islamic democratic model, a task it is superbly equipped to do and has already eagerly commenced. This will also have the salutary effect of placing the responsibility for transforming the Middle East into a secure, prosperous region that does not export extremism back where it always should have been – in the hands of the people themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Pull Those Boots Off The Ground”, *Newsweek*, 31 December 2008.