

# A COMPLICATED DECISION: WHY TURKEY IS NOT LIKELY TO FOLLOW IN IRAN'S NUCLEAR FOOTSTEPS

*The regional security dilemma stemming from Iran's nuclear program has led many to speculate about whether or not Turkey will opt to pursue a nuclear weapons capability. Since 2006, Turkey has been named as one of the states likely to seek out nuclear weapons if Iran were to decide to develop its own nuclear arsenal. These assumptions, however, do not account for Ankara's long held and consistent policies on nonproliferation and nuclear weapons. This paper explores Turkey's approach to nuclear issues and identifies the numerous constraints a Turkish leader would face when making the decision to pursue for a nuclear weapon.*

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## Proliferation Fictions, Turkey and the Bomb

Fears of the rapid spread of nuclear weapons have been constant in the international arena since the end of The Second World War. The consistent predictions about a cascade of proliferation stem from the simple assumption that power begets power, and that states are not likely to sit idly by as their neighbors acquire the means to destroy them. Since the 2002 revelation of Iran's clandestine construction of undeclared nuclear facilities, experts have been warning of the inevitable spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Turkey is often lumped together with Saudi Arabia and Egypt as the most likely candidates to pursue a nuclear capability if Iran were to ever decide to develop atomic weapons.<sup>2</sup> Experts point to Turkey's history of antagonism with the Islamic Republic, rival religious traditions, and the proxy conflicts in Iraq and Syria as evidence for Ankara's necessity to balance a nuclear capable or armed Iran. But is this really the case? And is Ankara really on the precipice of making a decision to break from its decades old approach to nuclear weapons and nonproliferation by pursuing an independent nuclear weapons capability?

Despite the seemingly simple logic, the dire predictions fail to take into account Ankara's long held and remarkably consistent policy on nuclear weapons and nonproliferation. They also do not account for the long list of proliferation constraints that would likely dampen Turkish enthusiasm for the Bomb. To get a better sense of the components influencing Turkish decision-making, it is critical to distinguish between motivations –i.e. factors that may motivate policy makers in Ankara to explore acquiring nuclear weapons– and making the actual decision to pursue a nuclear weapon. While Turkey's actions suggest a discomfort with Iran's nuclear and missile programs, Ankara's efforts to date are in line with its historical approaches to external security threats and are not indicative of a country seriously considering making a decision to pursue an independent nuclear weapons capability.

### Iran and the Pillars of Turkey's Nonproliferation Strategy

Unlike the United States, its European allies and Israel, Turkey's Iran policy has not solely focused on preventing the Islamic Republic from achieving a nuclear weapons break out capability – i.e. enough stockpiled low enriched uranium that could be quickly re-enriched to weapons levels if the Islamic Republic were to decide to pursue nuclear weapons. Ankara supports Iran's right to enrichment, believing that International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections are sufficient to prevent the

1 For a previous study about forecasting Turkey's nuclear future see, Jessica Varnum, "Turkey in Transition: Toward or Away from Nuclear Weapons?," in *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, ed. William Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 229-254.

2 "Iran could trigger nuclear arms race in Middle East", *Haaretz*, 6 March 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/iran-could-trigger-nuclear-arms-race-in-middle-east-1.271591>

Islamic Republic from diverting fissile material for weapons use. Instead, Turkey is working to ensure that the Iranian leadership is incentivized to remain non-nuclear by decreasing tensions. Policy makers argue that strong diplomatic ties will increase trust and create an environment that incentivizes Iran be more cooperative with the IAEA.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey's policy is rooted in its belief in the value and viability of global nonproliferation norms, its interpretation of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and how those two factors have been incorporated into its foreign and security policies. This approach is underpinned by a series of nonproliferation pillars that collectively explain the

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government's long-standing views on nuclear issues. These pillars include a belief in deterrence, the global adherence to international institutions, and are influenced by domestic identity, international norms, and local electoral politics.<sup>4</sup> Collectively, this approach lends itself to a more multilateral approach to nuclear issues and constrains unilateral acts to balance a potential nuclear threat.

### The NPT and Turkish Security: Deterrence and the Nonproliferation Norm

In Turkey, there is a sense that if the international community fails to address the Iranian nuclear issue, and either Iran decides to proliferate or external powers carry out military strikes, the NPT would be seriously undermined.<sup>5</sup> Ankara feels strongly about the nuclear nonproliferation norm, maintaining that the NPT is a critical component of global efforts to prevent the spread of the Bomb. Ankara believes that the NPT was a compromise between the official nuclear weapons states and the non-nuclear weapons states, and maintains that all signatories have the right to access civilian nuclear technology.<sup>6</sup> Turkey also supports the conditions in the Treaty saying that

3 For an overview of Turkey's approach to the Iran nuclear issue please refer to:

Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2008, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2008/10/07/turkey-s-middle-east-policies-between-neo-ottomanism-and-kemalism/39k>

Aaron Stein, "Understanding Turkey's Position on the Iranian Nuclear Program", James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 12 January 2012, [http://cns.miis.edu/wmdjunction/120112\\_turkey\\_iran\\_nuclear.htm](http://cns.miis.edu/wmdjunction/120112_turkey_iran_nuclear.htm)

4 Şebnem Udum, "Turkey's Non-Nuclear Weapon State Status: A Theoretical Assessment", *ISYP Journal*, Vol.3, No. 2, 2007, pp. 51-59.

5 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has described the prospect of an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facility as a "disaster." "Israeli strike on Iran would be 'disastrous,' Turkey's Erdoğan says", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 March 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/israeli-strike-on-iran-would-be-disastrous-turkeys-erdogan-says-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=17349&NewsCatID=338>

6 The NPT defines the official nuclear weapons states as those that conducted a nuclear test before 1 January 1967. The five official nuclear weapons states are: The United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China. Israel, India, and Pakistan are non-signatories to the Treaty and are not considered to be official nuclear weapons states. The People's Republic of North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT on 10 January 2003. It is also not considered to be an official nuclear weapons state.

the non-nuclear weapons states have an obligation to keep to their commitment by not proliferating and accepting IAEA safeguards. This has led Turkish policymakers to support international efforts to strengthen nonproliferation norms, export controls, and the IAEA's inspection regime, so long as they don't infringe on the non-nuclear weapons states' ability to pursue peaceful nuclear technologies.

Turkey's strong support for global nonproliferation norms is paired with a belief in the value of nuclear weapons for nuclear deterrence. Policymakers support the idea of a nuclear free world, but have made clear that they do not think that disarmament will happen any time soon. In the minds of many, nuclear weapons are an important tool for Turkish security and strategic stability. Policymakers feel that strategic stability and NATO's deterrent would be undermined by the unilateral withdrawal of NATO nuclear weapons from Europe or a regional rush to proliferate. Therefore, the Turkish approach is to pursue policies that balance its support for American tactical nuclear weapon deployments in Europe with vocal calls for the strengthening of global nonproliferation norms.

To bolster the credibility of the NATO nuclear deterrent Ankara has been making preparations to ensure that its nuclear role within the Alliance remains intact. Turkey is home to an estimated 60-70 short-range American nuclear weapons. 50 of the bombs are reserved for delivery by American dual-capable (DCA) F-16s. Due to basing restrictions American DCAs are not permanently stationed in Turkey and would have to be flown in from another European airbase and loaded with the weapons before flying on to their targets. However, since the end of the Cold War, NATO has reduced the role of nuclear weapons in its security planning by increasing the time needed to deliver these weapons. In the past, pilots and crews trained to have the bombs airborne in minutes. Currently, NATO military planners have concluded that a scenario requiring the immediate delivery of nuclear weapons is unlikely. It is assumed that if circumstances in the region were to change dramatically, the Alliance's decision to base DCAs on Turkish territory again would be an important signal to any potential adversary. The other 10-20 bombs are reserved for delivery by Turkish dual-capable F-16s, though the status of these aircraft is currently unknown. It is unclear if Turkish pilots still train for nuclear missions, or are simply tasked with escorting American and European pilots to their targets. Nevertheless, the Pentagon is installing a stopgap measure on Turkish DCAs to ensure that they will still be able to carry NATO tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, calls within the NATO Alliance for the removal of these weapons have increased and Turkey has found itself having to prepare for a potential NATO nuclear weapons free Europe.<sup>8</sup> Turkey has indicated that it would support the withdrawal of

<sup>7</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, "Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons", *Special Report No. 3*, Federation of American Scientists, May 2012, [http://www.fas.org/docs/Non\\_Strategic\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons.pdf](http://www.fas.org/docs/Non_Strategic_Nuclear_Weapons.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> George Perkovich, Malcolm Chalmers, Steven Pifer, Paul Schulte, Jaclyn Tandler, "Looking Beyond the Chicago Summit: Nuclear Weapons in Europe and the Future of NATO", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2012, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/beyond\\_chicago\\_summit.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/beyond_chicago_summit.pdf)

the weapons if the decision is made in consultation with the Alliance and is not done unilaterally by the Americans.<sup>9</sup> In the future this could lead to Turkey's support for the removal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. It is likely, however, that Turkish policymakers would support conditioning such action on reciprocal Russian reductions of its arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> If the United States and Russia were to ever reach an agreement on reciprocal reductions, NATO alliance, including Turkey, indicated in the 2010 Strategic Concept that they would be prepared to rely on the United States, the United Kingdom's and France's strategic (land based and submarine based long range ballistic missiles) nuclear forces for deterrence.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Turkish policies suggest that Ankara is satisfied with the nuclear *status quo* and is committed to putting in place the equipment and infrastructure to continue its nuclear role within the Alliance.

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## Electoral Politics and Domestic Issues

Ideationally Turkey sees itself as a committed member of the nonproliferation regime. A shift in policy would be out of character, and likely lead to Turkey's labeling as a "rogue state". The inevitable sanctions would have very serious implications for the country's export oriented economy and global political standing. The slowdown in the economy, combined with the lumping of Turkey together with states like Iran and North Korea would undermine a series of critical components of Turkey's long-standing social and economic reforms. These combinations of factors would likely lead to considerable backlash from critical constituencies and negatively affect any government's electoral chances.<sup>12</sup>

9 Susi Snyder and Wilber van der Zeijden, "Withdrawal Issues: What NATO countries say about the future of tactical nuclear weapon in Europe," *IKV Pax Christi*, March 2011, <http://www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/files/download/Withdrawal%20Issues.pdf>

10 Russia is estimated to have around 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons. See Hans M. Kristensen, *Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons*, Federation of Atomic Scientists, May 2012, [http://www.fas.org/docs/Non\\_Strategic\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons.pdf](http://www.fas.org/docs/Non_Strategic_Nuclear_Weapons.pdf), p. 53.

According to and estimate by Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, "[The] 2,080 warheads are operational for delivery by anti-ballistic missiles, air-defense missiles, tactical aircraft, and naval cruise missiles, depth bombs, and torpedoes. The Navy's tactical nuclear weapons are not deployed at sea under normal circumstances but stored on land."

See Hans Kristensen, "Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons", *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, Federation of Atomic Scientists, 25 March 2012, <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2009/03/russia-2.php>

11 "Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization", North Atlantic Treaty Organization, November 2010, <http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf>

12 Etel Solingen argues in *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* that leaders "oriented to economic growth via the global political economy have, by and large, created conditions that reined in nuclearization."

See Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) pg. x.

In addition to the economic constraints, a decision to proliferate would seriously undermine the foreign policy goals of Turkey's current leadership. The crux of the current government's foreign policy has been aimed at transforming Turkey into a cultural bridge between the Western and Eastern world. Accordingly Turkey, with its democratic institutions, could and should serve as a diplomatic and economic go between. These efforts also necessitate Ankara's acceptance internationally as a trusted actor and good global citizen. Any actions to undermine this would be detrimental to Turkey's regional ambitions and would likely lead to the undoing of its current political efforts. Suspicious acts by Turkey that could threaten regional stability are likely to be resisted by the traditional powers of the Middle East and Central Asia, and could lead to a regional and global backlash. With regards to proliferation, this dynamic is likely to reinforce Ankara's commitment to nonproliferation instruments and constrain the likelihood of future clandestine nuclear weapons efforts.

Domestically, successive Turkish governments have not been subjected to the same anti-nuclear sentiments as the other NATO countries currently hosting nuclear weapons. Turkish academia, media, and politicians are heavily focused on the threat posed by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party – recognized by the United States and the European Union as a terrorist organization), rather than on nuclear weapons, disarmament, and nonproliferation. The de-politicization of the issue has allowed policymakers to enact policies without the fear of political reprisals. This has had both positive and negative effects for Turkish policy. On the one hand, the government feels little internal pressure to remove tactical nuclear weapons. As a result, Turkish policy has changed little since the end of the Cold War. However, this has also allowed policymakers to avoid nationalist political pressures to match would be proliferators like Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Critically, Turkey's response to all three of these proliferation pressures was to support greater controls on nuclear export, more thorough IAEA inspections in the form of the Additional Protocol, and the pursuit of conventional weapons systems to defend against missile attack.<sup>13</sup> These efforts continue to be underpinned by the NATO nuclear guarantee and collectively suggest that Turkey's policy *vis-à-vis* proliferation remains rooted in the policies it pursued during the Cold War.

## Technical Constraints

Even if one were to discount the aforementioned constraints, Turkey's road to the Bomb would be further complicated by its lack of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities.<sup>14</sup> While Ankara has contracted with Russia's Rosatom to build four light water

13 See Şebnem Udum, "Missile Proliferation in the Middle East: Turkey and Missile Defense", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.4, No.3, Fall 2003, pp. 71-102.

14 For an overview of Turkey's current nuclear infrastructure see "Regulatory and Institutional Framework for Nuclear Activities: Turkey," Nuclear Legislation in OECD Countries, Nuclear Energy Agency, 2008, <http://www.oecd-nea.org/law/legislation/turkey.pdf>

nuclear reactors at one site in the Akkuyu Bay on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, the Turkish – Russian nuclear cooperation agreement mandates that Russia supply the nuclear fuel rods and take back the spent nuclear fuel.<sup>15</sup> The Russian cooperation agreement, as well as all of Turkey's other nuclear agreements, has provisions against nuclear weapons development. The agreement specifies that the transferred technology will be inspected by the IAEA and includes a provision mandating that both Turkey and Russia establish a robust accounting system to ensure that all nuclear material transferred is accounted for.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, if Turkey were to ever conclude an agreement for the import of either enrichment or reprocessing facilities, the provisions in Turkey's nuclear cooperation agreements places limits on the levels of enrichment and the circumstances that would permit reprocessing using foreign equipment. It seems unlikely that Ankara would ever import either an enrichment or reprocessing facility, considering that the transfer of such equipment has been limited to trade between states that already possess that capability in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Turkey is far more likely to conclude nuclear fuel guarantees and take back provisions, in order to ensure that all of its future reactors have fuel. These agreements also rid the country of the burden of dealing with reactor waste. The take back provision was reported to have been a requirement for the 2006 nuclear tender, and was used by politicians eager to convince Turkey's nuclear-wary public on the promise and safety of nuclear energy.<sup>18</sup>

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A sudden departure from this approach would certainly raise eyebrows amongst the traditional powers and likely lead to behind the scenes diplomatic actions by the United States to prevent Turkey's nuclearization. A determined effort to develop an indigenous enrichment and reprocessing program would likely lead to allegations of clandestine nuclear weapons development and set in motion the cycle of accusations

15 Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Russian Federation for the Cooperation in the Use of Nuclear Energy for Peaceful Purposes.

16 Ibid.

17 Fred McGoldrick, "Limiting Transfer of Enrichment and Reprocessing Technology: Issues, Constraints, Options", *Report for Harvard Belfer Center for Science and International Security, Project on Managing the Atom*, May 2011, <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/MTA-NSG-report-color.pdf>

18 According to the World Nuclear Association, "it was later reported that TAEK required foreign vendors to take back used fuel, and none except ASE were prepared to do so."

See "Nuclear Power in Turkey," World Nuclear Association, April 2012, [http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/inf128-nuclear\\_power\\_in\\_turkey.html](http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/inf128-nuclear_power_in_turkey.html)

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about intent, and could lead to sanctions. The sanctions carry with them incredible political and economic risk because of Turkey’s focus on increasing exports in order to drive economic growth. The actions would also likely include the scaling back of military –to– military assistance, and a renewed effort in the U.S. Congress to block weapons sales

to Ankara. In both cases, these moves would seriously undermine Ankara’s ongoing battle with the PKK, which remains Turkey’s biggest security issue. These likely consequences would be in addition to the aforementioned economic consequences and Ankara’s likely addition to the list of “rogue states”.

## Conclusion

The decision to proliferate is fraught with political risk that any leader would have to weigh before making the decision to proliferate. Turkey’s potential path to the bomb is littered with constraints that make deciding to pursue nuclear weapons politically disadvantageous. When viewed in their totality, the Turkish policy to date suggests that Ankara is committed to its non-nuclear status. A deviation from this norm risks sparking international condemnation and blunting economic growth for a deterrence capability that almost all members of the Turkish elite feel they already have. A more practical, and far more widely accepted approach would be for Turkey to continue its reliance on the NATO nuclear guarantee and bolstering conventional defense capabilities. These efforts will remain tied to Turkey’s participation in NATO, and underpinned by the Alliance’s nuclear guarantee. When viewed in tandem with how it is has incorporated the NPT and nonproliferation into its national security policy, it becomes clear that an independent nuclear weapons capability would be anathema to Turkish interests in the short and long term. A nuclear weapons decision would be wildly out of character with its history of nonproliferation in general, and likely lead to a set of consequences that no Turkish leader could handle electorally.