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# Italian-Turkish Relations: Potential and Limits of a ‘Strategic Partnership’

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## Abstract

*Italy and Turkey have built over the decades a partnership based on economic cooperation, shared international concerns, and a common vision of Turkey’s future as a member of the European Union. Italian perceptions of Turkey, however, are negatively affected by anti-Muslim sentiments among the Italian public. Negative views about Turkey’s post-Kemalist establishment have become more widespread also among Italian elites in the context of the debate on Turkey’s ‘drift from the West’. The ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, which has forced Ankara to appreciate the common challenges it faces in the MENA region together with the rest of the West, has partly assuaged concerns of a “de-alignment”, confirming that Turkey has specific ambitions but also broadly shares Western strategic assessments. While Rome remains committed to Turkey’s EU aspirations, the fading of the membership perspective since 2005 has led Italian governments to support the accession process mainly as way to further strengthen bilateral ties. The relationship, finally, is adjusting to new power realities. Turkey’s ascent at a time of economic and political difficulties in Italy and in the EU, raises questions of influence in areas of common*

*presence. Ongoing strategic realignments in the MENA region present opportunities for Italian-Turkish cooperation, but also highlight areas of friction.*

## Key Words

Italy, Turkish foreign policy, Arab Spring, European integration, Mediterranean, public opinion.

## Introduction: Italian Arguments about Turkey and Turkey’s EU Membership

Support for closer ties between Italy and Turkey and for Turkey’s EU bid has been historically strong and largely bipartisan in Italy. Because of its long-standing commitment to Turkey’s European integration and zealous advocacy of this goal among more skeptical EU members, Italy has been able to present itself as Turkey’s “best friend” in Europe- a characterization that has probably not been taken literally by

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Ankara and to which Italians themselves have not always given proper follow up in terms of bold initiatives in the EU context.

Pro-Turkey arguments made by Italian politicians of progressive or conservative orientations are similar, even though they are sometimes ranked differently or are given different emphasis.<sup>1</sup> The central one is the “common Mediterranean identity” of Italy and Turkey. Italy still has historical legacies and interests in the Mediterranean region and has since long aspired to develop a successful “Mediterranean policy” as a third dimension of an international strategy that since World War II has been based on two main pillars: Europeanism (European integration) and

Atlanticism (a firm alignment with the United States).<sup>2</sup> In fact, the emphasis put by Italian statesmen on Italy’s and Turkey’s “Mediterraneanness” is strictly linked to broader considerations about the future of the European project and Western security. From an Italian perspective, the enlargement of the EU to Turkey would help shift the axis of European integration towards the south, thus compensating for the eastern enlargements of 2004 and 2007.<sup>3</sup> Italy has endorsed the “reunification” of the European continent after the fall of the Berlin Wall but has not hidden its frustrations with the comparatively

much less developed southern and Mediterranean dimensions of European cooperation. In a speech given at Ankara University in the fall of 2009, Italy’s President Giorgio Napolitano went so far as to argue that the EU needs Turkey if it wants to become a true “European power” (*“Europe puissance”*).<sup>4</sup>

Italy has also a vested interest in “Mediterranean stability” broadly defined, a goal that has been challenged by several developments, most recently the uprisings in the Arab world. The Mediterranean basin provides a gateway for Italian economic interests to foreign markets, but is also the backdoor for

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illegal immigration and trafficking to the Italian peninsula. In this respect, Rome has been looking at Ankara as a natural and essential

interlocutor. As both first-rank regional actors and NATO allies, Italy and Turkey are seen in Rome as natural partners in “Mediterranean security”. Common security priorities include control of terrorist and criminal activities and illicit trade flows across the Mediterranean basin, but also the shared concern that developments in the conflict-ridden Middle East do not spread or spill-over and transform the Mediterranean Sea into a transmission belt for instability in Europe and Eurasia. In the context of the current uprisings and conflicts in the EU’s southern neighborhood, Italian elites have largely subscribed to the popular

view that Turkey can represent a source of inspiration for other predominantly Muslim societies engaged in a process of democratic change. Whereas until recently Turkey was mainly seen as the regional power that could talk and mediate with Arab regimes that had ambiguous or adversarial relationships with the West, now it is seen as the actor that can pressure challenged dictators to adopt reform or to step down - the case of Syria- while influencing societal and political developments in countries such as post-Mubarak Egypt and post-Ben Ali Tunisia in which mass forces coming from “political Islam” are faced with the choice of whether to pursue political power through democratic means in secular, multi-party political systems or by establishing non-democratic Islamist regimes.

A second common pro-Turkey argument made by Italian elites and experts has a markedly geo-economic flavor: Turkey’s geo-economic value to Europe is that of “energy hub” connecting the European mainland to the gas- and oil- rich regions in the south and east, namely the Caspian basin, Central Asia, Iran, and Iraq. Energy relations are a particularly important driver of Turkish-Italian bilateral cooperation given Italy’s high level of dependency on foreign sources and the presence in the Turkish market of some of Italy’s leading energy firms, such as Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI). Because of its historically active presence in gas- and oil- rich countries of North Africa and the Middle East, some

have argued that ENI has in effect been the main author of Italy’s Mediterranean policy.<sup>5</sup> The recent crisis in Libya, a country where both Turkey and Italy have been historically deeply engaged, has displayed the role that strategic firms in both countries play in the bilateral relationship while also highlighting the potential for competition on issues such as access to natural resources.

## Civilizational and Religious Factors

Other pro-Turkey arguments made by Italian elites have to do with cultural or even ‘civilizational’ considerations. Italian politicians have fully bought into the metaphor of the ‘bridge’ that Western leaders and some Turkish politicians have used when trying to capture the defining element of Turkey’s identity as a nation and its geopolitical role as a regional power. As a Muslim society with secular institutions and a republican form of government, Turkey has been presented to the Italian public, as was noted already, as a model of the successful encounter of Islam with democracy and of Eastern and Western cultures. The Italian center-right has placed particular emphasis on Turkey’s assets as a Western country allied to the US and integrated in NATO that can conduct a credible and highly valuable dialogue with Middle East regimes. The Italian center-left has also often stressed the positive impact that Muslim Turkey’s EU membership would have on the

future of the European project itself, making the EU a more open and plural multicultural entity.<sup>6</sup>

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Cultural and ‘geo-civilizational’ arguments, however, are far from uncontroversial in Italy and have, in fact, often been challenged, or even openly rebutted, by sections of the same establishment that is officially pro-Turkey, especially when it comes to Turkey’s EU bid. In fact, Italian conservatives seem currently divided on Turkey and Turkey’s European integration. Turkey’s very belonging to European and Western civilization is questioned by parties, or individual leaders within parties, that subscribe to the view that Europe’s response to the dangers and challenges of globalization should be to rediscover its roots and tradition, starting with Christianity. These are the same parties demanding that European officials in Brussels more rigorously and conservatively define Europe’s borders, geographically as well as culturally.<sup>7</sup>

The Northern League (NL), a powerful party and important partner of Prime Minister Berlusconi’s center-right coalition government, has been vocally opposed to Turkey’s EU membership from the start on the grounds that Turkey’s Muslim identity makes it simply unfit for what is seen, essentially, as a community

of Christian nations.<sup>8</sup> A xenophobic and anti-immigration regionalist party, the NL has also repeatedly used Turkey as a proxy in other contentious domestic debates. In NL’s propaganda, Turkey has become synonymous with “Muslims” or the “Islamic threat”. The NL campaign against the construction of mosques in northern Italy, for instance, has been presented also as an “anti-Turkey” campaign (eventhough Turkish minorities in Italy are negligible, the large Muslim ones being made of Albanians, North Africans, and Pakistanis). Campaigns against multiculturalism and in favor of strict regulations on migration quotas and flows have too been presented as anti-Muslim/anti-Turkey initiatives. In fact, among the arguments that the NL and xenophobic groups in the Italian far right have made against Turkey is that, once admitted into the EU, Turkey would act as the spokesperson and agent for Muslim communities across Europe, thus fomenting anti-Christian fanaticism, perhaps Jihad, and working like a ‘Trojan horse’ for the collapse of the European integration project from within.<sup>9</sup> Statements by some Arab leaders—including Libya’s Gaddafi in August 2010- according to which Turkey’s EU membership would help Arabs convert Europeans to Islam have undoubtedly reinforced this fear.<sup>10</sup> Events in 2010, when Turkey was often openly criticized in Washington and other Western capitals for its de-alignment from Western policy towards Iran, gave further ammunition to arguments about a new international ‘Islamic coalition’ led by Ankara.

Despite the threat of an anti-Turkey referendum if Turkey’s EU membership negotiations ever came to a successful end, however, it seems unlikely that the NL or any other Italian party would be truly willing to face the consequences of an Italian veto at the European level, moving from rhetoric to deeds. What is sure is that, directly or indirectly, anti-immigration and xenophobic Italian parties will keep working to the detriment of Turkey’s image among Italians, finding support from other sections of the Italian political elite, especially those of conservative and populist orientations.

“Turkey-skeptics” are found in growing numbers, in fact, also in the ranks of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s Freedom’s People, the largest center-right party. Despite the US government’s long-standing advocacy of Turkey’s European integration, sections of Italian conservatives have combined a strong pro-US, pro-Atlanticist orientation during the Bush years with a wariness of Islam and deep skepticism of Muslim cultures, including the Turkish one, which are seen as hard to integrate in “Western civilization” and prone to fanaticism.<sup>11</sup> This has led many to look at Turkey as only ‘imperfectly Western’ – a position common to Orientalists in Europe and in America who have often described Turkey as a “torn country”. More recently, opinions of Italian conservatives have been influenced by the international debate on Turkey’s alleged “drift from the West”, which has only reinforced concerns of those

who have looked at Turkey since the 2000s as ‘hanging on a balance’ because of the rise of a political elite open to democratic principles but also “rooted in Islam”.<sup>12</sup> Domestic developments, such as the “Ergenekon” investigation and the many controversies surrounding it, or the most recent attempts to change the Turkish Constitution without first reaching a broad consensus in the Turkish parliament, have been followed with concern by Italian elites. Their conclusion has often been that the new ‘Islamic establishment’s power agenda often takes priority over its democracy agenda, and that in any event Turkey’s current ruling party sees democratization as inseparable from the complete defeat of Turkey’s traditional secular and allegedly more pro-Western elites. Worries about ongoing Islamization, moreover, have been reinforced by episodes such as the killings of members of the small Christian community in Turkey, such as the assassination in Iskenderun in June 2010 of Archbishop Luigi Padovese, the Apostolic Vicar of Anatolia.<sup>13</sup>

Newspapers such as *Il Giornale* or *Libero* have been in some instances the vanguard of this campaign against Turkey based on a conflation of (often simplistic) arguments about Turkey’s alleged simultaneous religious, political, and geopolitical drifts. News coming from Turkey are chosen selectively and alarm is created around episodes that send a negative image of Turkey and weaken its ‘Western credentials’. The assassination of Mons. Padovese

offered fresh new material for this type of ideological stance on Turkey. Even though at the beginning the Pope himself had excluded religious motivations for the assassination, several newspapers made the case that this episode could not be underestimated as it tragically testified to the deeper and broader trends cutting across contemporary Turkey.<sup>14</sup> Articles appeared soon after the event commenting not only on the condition of Christians in Turkey—described as the bearers of truth and the defenders of freedom in a society that excludes them and tries to repress them—but also on Turkey’s twin processes of democratization and modernization.<sup>15</sup> The latter was presented as highly uncertain and in any case irrelevant as the defining dynamic of today’s Turkey would be “Islamization”.

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The presence of these views in the Italian debate should not be confused with a general opposition to Turkey among conservatives. A real debate, although not always sophisticated and informed enough, nonetheless seems to be ongoing. Silvio Berlusconi, for reasons that have to do also with his personal and often-publicized friendship with Turkish three-time Prime Minister Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan, is a self-proclaimed “friend of Turkey” and has been consistently a strong advocate of Turkey’s EU membership. The leader of the post-fascist Italian right, Gianfranco Fini, an outspoken supporter of closer ties between politics and the Catholic-Christian ethics, has expressed strong support for Turkey and its European future. Visiting the tomb of Ataturk in 2008 as president of the Italian parliament’s lower chamber, Fini praised Turkey for its progress towards democracy and called for a fight against negative stereotypes of Turkish culture and religion among the Italian and European public. Farefuturo, a think-tank of the Italian right engaged in developing a new ‘worldview’ for Italian conservatives, also closely follows developments in Turkey and has often highlighted the value that closer Turkish-Italian and EU-Turkish relations could have on the future of Europe as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

Italian Catholics of conservative orientations are currently divided on Turkey.<sup>17</sup> The Union of the Center (*Unione di Centro*), the party closest to the Catholic Church in Italy, hosts among its ranks both intransigent opponents of Turkey’s European integration and supporters of a dialogue between Turkish Islamic moderates and Europe’s Christian democrats.<sup>18</sup> Rocco Buttiglione, an old-time leader of Italian “Catholic moderates” and a Turkey skeptic himself, has nonetheless lent strength to the argument that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) can be seen in many ways as a

Turkish version of *Democrazia Cristiana* (the Christian Democratic Party that ruled Italy throughout the Cold War years).<sup>19</sup> Consequently, he and other “moderates” have worked so that the AKP can establish formal ties with the European People’s Party in the European Parliament. Their argument is that both moderate Christians and Islamists are interested, from their respective religious standpoints, in a renegotiation of the place of religion in the public sphere. Both favor an understanding of secular institutions as non-religious and not anti-religious, as implied by secularism. They also both reject relativism, and insist on a notion of progress as a progression towards the religious truth, rather than departure from tradition.

The perspective of the Vatican itself is arguably even more critical in influencing Italian Christian public opinion. Opposed to Turkey’s EU membership on the grounds that Europe must be defined in Christian terms, after being elected Pope Benedict XVI has been more restrained in his statements.<sup>20</sup> Especially since the apostolic trip to Turkey in 2006, Benedict XVI has worked to promote interreligious dialogue between Catholic Christians and Muslims and has concentrated on verifying Turkish authorities’ commitment to the protection of the Christian community in Anatolia, generally avoiding comments that could be read as a “no” to Turkey in the EU.<sup>21</sup> Some in the Vatican have criticized the opportunistic use of Christian rhetoric

to support a message that at the bottom is xenophobic and intolerant- a critique that seems aimed at certain initiatives of the NL in particular.<sup>22</sup>

A last note on the supporters of Turkey is needed. Those in the Italian elites who have advocated Turkey’s full integration into the EU precisely on the grounds that Turkey’s identity as a Muslim country would strengthen Europe, showing that the EU is not an exclusive club of Christian nations and that a “clash of civilizations” is avoidable, have indirectly (and inadvertently) lent substance to the view that Turkey is indeed a ‘different’ country. In other words, the very choice to see Muslim culture as the outstanding feature of contemporary Turkish identity and the core element of the “New Turkey” emerged in the past decade from the crumbling of the Kemalist establishment has reinforced the slippery “civilizational discourse” on Turkey, weakening in parallel alternative approaches.

## The Economic Argument

If cultural and civilizational arguments about Turkey have engendered controversy, especially in recent years, the economic argument has kept many otherwise potential Turkey skeptics restrained. Turkey has become over the decades one of the main markets for Italian products and foreign investment. Italy has had a trade surplus with Turkey in the past years, while bilateral trade has passed from around 7 billion dollars

in 2004 to 16 billion dollars in 2010.<sup>23</sup> The economic crisis of 2008-2009 has negatively affected the relationship (Italian exports suffered greatly from the contraction of Turkish demand between 2008 and 2009) and the ongoing diversification of Turkey's import and export patterns has confronted Italy with the reality of fast-rising competitors, such as China (the Italian share in Turkey's import market has fallen in recent years from 7.1% in 2004 to 5.5% in 2008 and 2009). Despite this, Italy was one of Turkey's top trade partners in 2010. The level of interpenetration of the Italian and Turkish economies is such that powerful established economic lobbies in both countries favor even closer ties. In Italy, thirst for investment in the Turkish market seems to be on the rise (Italian investment in Turkey has increased by 26% between 2008 and 2010) and has been notably accompanied by the call for a swift integration of Turkey in the EU. Many of Italy's firms in the field of energy (ENI, ENEL), defense (Finmeccanica), banking (Unicredit), and automobiles (FIAT) do business or have joint ventures in Turkey. Their position is well represented by the former head of the Italian business association and the chairman of Ferrari, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, who argued already in 2007 that, from an economic standpoint, Turkey is already largely integrated into the European Union and should therefore also officially become a member.<sup>24</sup> The role that the 1995 Customs Union between Turkey and the EU has played in creating this situation, however, leads to a question:

is Turkey's full membership in the EU seen as really necessary from a business perspective? The answer from leading sectors of the Italian business is a "yes". Companies making massive structural investments in Turkey, such as Unicredit in banking, admit that they have a vested interest in full membership as this would have a direct bearing on sovereign and political risks estimates from which their investment plans and long-term profit prospects depend.<sup>25</sup> The inflow of foreign capital in Turkey would also be served by Turkey's full membership into the European economic union. In other words, many among Italian firms are interested not just in further growth of the Turkish market, but in Turkish modernization and democratization through Europeanization as a guarantee that the Turkish market will continue to be stable, open, and free. These quite established views, however, have been put to test as a result of recent international economic developments. The Euro crisis of 2010-2011, happening at a time of Chinese-level growth rates for the Turkish economy, could not offer a starker contrast between the Euro zone and the Turkish market. This has led a growing number of Italian elites to acknowledge that Turkey's economic future and performance can be safe, if not brighter, outside the EU.

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## Elites and Public Opinion

“Pro-Turkey” arguments have managed to neutralize, or at least contain, negative views of Turkey among elites, but the Italian public remains ill-disposed overall about Turkey. Available polls reveal that there is a significant gap between the position of Italian elites (which overall have a good opinion of Turkey) and public opinion (which holds more negative views).<sup>26</sup> This gap is particularly noticeable in the center-left in which the elites are very much in favor of Turkey’s EU integration whereas the public is skeptical. In the center-right the gap is narrower apparently only because, as has already been pointed out, even elites are divided.

Prejudice, stereotype and, most often, sheer ignorance still affect Italians’ views on Turkey. The average Italian has only second-hand information about Turkey as Turkey is still not among their favorite touristic destinations in the Mediterranean. Italy’s share of tourism to Turkey was a tiny 2.4% in 2009. Italian tourists prefer Greece over Turkey and traditionally choose Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco as Mediterranean destinations.<sup>27</sup> The current turmoil in North Africa and the Middle East may perhaps help rebalancing touristic flows to Turkey’s advantage. Many Italians seem to nonetheless ignore simple basic facts about Turkey’s culture, history and identity, including it being a republic with secular institutions and a long-standing member of Western

organizations such as NATO.<sup>28</sup> Many Italians believe that Turkey is an Arab country. When asked about issues concerning religious tolerance, gender equality, and development, Italians tend to put Turkey on a lower level than Arab countries that are given much lower ratings by international agencies. On some issues, such as democratization, Italians underestimate, or simply ignore, the progress made by Turkey in recent years.

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Despite these attitudes, Italians seem nonetheless relatively open when it comes to the question of Turkey’s European integration. The Italian public is comparatively less opposed to its possible membership than other Europeans, in particular the French, the Austrians and the Germans. The public also seems to be convinced that membership is set to come some day, displaying less cynicism about the end result of currently stalling EU-Turkey talks than other European publics and Turks themselves.<sup>29</sup> Reforms in Turkey, especially as regards gender equality and religious tolerance, moreover, are seen by Italians as capable of changing their views in the future on Turkey itself and this country’s value for the European

project.<sup>30</sup> The existence of this dynamic element in Italian perceptions of Turkey can be perhaps connected to the messages from Italian elites. Italians seem to have gotten the point made by the main Italian political parties that, on balance, Turkey means opportunities for Italy and that a democratic and fast developing Turkey is an asset for the EU when addressing the multiple challenges arising from Europe's southern and eastern neighborhoods.

## Italy and Turkey in an Evolving International Context

The phrase that Italian politicians generally use to describe the relationship between Italy and Turkey is “strategic partnership”.<sup>31</sup> The term “strategic” underscores long-standing ties, a convergence of interests that is not contingent but structural, and a long-term commitment to cooperation. In many respects, this characterization is not an overstatement. As has already been pointed out, Italy has for several decades been one of Turkey’s key trading partners and an outspoken supporter of Turkey’s EU aspirations among EU members. Convergence of interests, moreover, has often translated into concrete cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral levels. Italy and Turkey have both actively worked for the stabilization of the Balkans, often finding themselves as contributing countries to the same international missions. Both Italy and

Turkey have a clear priority in the full stabilization of the Balkans. Italy can rely on historical ties with Albania (in which it led a UN-mandated stabilization effort in 1997, the “Alba Mission”) and strong economic, cultural ties with Slovenia, and areas of Croatia. Turkey, through its Ottoman legacy, has an influence in the entire region, but particularly in Muslim-populated countries, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>32</sup> This has led to a broad division of responsibilities between Italy and Turkey in the region and joint efforts in some areas.

Italy and Turkey have worked together also in other places of their common neighborhood, including in Lebanon. Lebanon provides the example of Italy and Turkey working together for the solution of a conflict which has threatened to inflame the entire Mediterranean and Middle East. Italy took the lead of the international effort to stabilize Lebanon after the war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006. Rome was head of the UN-mandated peacekeeping force in the south of the country (UNIFIL II) until January 2010.<sup>33</sup> Turkey, for its part, has combined a presence on the field with indirect mediation between the Syrian and Israeli governments in 2008.<sup>34</sup>

Italy and Turkey have also cooperated closely within NATO, bringing to the transatlantic alliance a Mediterranean/Southern perspective of security priorities. Recent cooperation included the stabilization of Afghanistan. Traditionally, moreover, Italy and Turkey

are the most reluctant among countries hosting US nuclear capabilities on their territory to accept a major review of US nuclear standing in Europe, as would be instead preferred by Germany. In 2009, Prime Minister Berlusconi claimed credit for having used his personal ties with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoan to remove the initial Turkish veto on the election of Anders Rasmussen to secretary general of NATO.<sup>35</sup>

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Another field in which Italy and Turkey have found some alignment is the relationship with Russia. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Berlusconi, and Prime Minister Erdoan have developed strong personal and political ties. Their cooperation has concentrated on business- especially energy which is at the core of this trilateral relationship. Italy’s leading energy firm, ENI, has worked closely with both Moscow and Ankara on opening new routes for gas and oil exports to Europe. In October 2009, Italy, Turkey and Russia signed a joint declaration on the construction of the Samsun-Ceyhan oil pipeline, connecting Turkey’s Black Sea coast to the Mediterranean, which will be open to the cooperation of firms from all three countries.<sup>36</sup>

Moving from regional to international cooperation, in recent years a convergence of interests between Italy and Turkey has emerged on some global issues such as the reform of the UN and a close dialogue with other Western partners on how to develop new international fora such as the G-20.

## Challenges to the Partnership

Such wide-ranging cooperation speaks of a strong partnership between Italy and Turkey. In order to be truly “strategic”, however, the partnership has to be based on shared priorities and supported by mutually reinforcing national dynamics. Recent trends in both Italian and Turkish foreign policy invite some caution on whether the latter two elements are to be taken for granted.

The main challenge to the partnership mainly comes from what seem to be different national trajectories: on the one hand, a fast-growing economy and rising regional actor with aspirations in the post-Ottoman space and beyond (Turkey); and on the other hand, a mid-sized power with a weakening economy, whose future remains firmly anchored in Euro-Atlantic structures (Italy).

As it comes to the Mediterranean, it is true that both Italy and Turkey are interested in security and stability, but a contrast has emerged about the respective standing and on the strategy to follow in relation to broadly shared strategic objectives. In the transition from the Cold War to the post-bipolar

world, Italy's focus has remained the Mediterranean, traditionally understood as the group of countries facing the Mediterranean basin.<sup>37</sup> For Turkey, which during the Cold War had a role in Mediterranean security defending NATO's southern flank, the focus has widened increasingly as to encompass the "Greater Middle East"- which after the fall of the Ottoman Empire was for a long time considered Turkey's backyard from which Ankara should keep disengaged.<sup>38</sup> If Italy's engagement in Afghanistan, as with other EU countries, can be best explained as an expression of solidarity with the US, Turkey's engagements in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars directly had to do with Turkey's geopolitical interests and national security concerns, as currently defined. The future of Afghanistan is key to the stability of Central Asia, on which Turkey aims to exert an influence based on cultural and ethnic ties and interest that Italy (despite some recent attempts in countries such as Kazakhstan) cannot parallel.<sup>39</sup> The future of Iraq is critical not only to the general political and security equation of the Middle East of which Turkey wants to a leading factor but, more specifically, to the solution of the Kurdish question- still a first-rank security priority for Ankara as dramatically highlighted by the recrudescence of violent acts by PKK in recent months.<sup>40</sup>

Combined with a different geopolitical focus and strategic projection is also a different relationship with the US. In fact, as Italy has concentrated on its Mediterranean priorities, generally

following America's lead in the Middle East, Turkey's re-appreciated interests and security concerns in the region have sometimes led Ankara to question or openly challenge the US strategy on core Middle-East issues.<sup>41</sup> America's occupation of Iraq in 2003, which the Italian government at the time supported (and became later opposed to mainly on the grounds that US action had been unilateral and not in accordance with international law), was instead met with resistance in Turkey, based not just on reservations about US interference in Middle Eastern affairs but on considerations of national interest.<sup>42</sup> Because of its security concerns, Turkey was forced to promptly develop its own policy towards post-Saddam Iraq, including cross-border armed intervention against the Kurdish separatists of the PKK and, coterminous with the gradual stabilization of Iraq, a new policy of engagement with Kurdish Iraqi authorities.

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When it comes to Iran, Italy and Turkey (both economic partners of Teheran) have been supporters of a policy of engagement, as pursued by the Obama administration after taking office in 2009, opposing in any case a

drift towards military confrontation.<sup>43</sup> Because of their different position (Turkey shares a long border with the Iranian republic), weight, and ambitions, however, this convergence has proved less strong than it could have initially seemed. Italy’s attempt to act as a facilitator of dialogue between the West and Teheran was soon exhausted in 2009 when Foreign Minister Franco Frattini tried to take advantage of Italy’s rotating presidency of the G-8 to involve Iran in the international discussions over the future of Afghanistan. This attempt failed not just because of bad timing (the G 8 Summit in Italy took place only weeks after the bloody riots in Teheran following the last presidential elections), but because the strategy of engagement laid out by the US did not achieve the hoped for results, leading the Obama administration to gradually move towards a more assertive stance including a push for global economic sanctions. Considering alignment with America and the rest of the EU as ultimately inescapable, Italy supported the adoption of new economic sanctions against Iran, although insisting that they received wide international support and that were not accompanied by the threat of military intervention—which Frattini had warned would lead to a “catastrophic scenario”.<sup>44</sup>

Turkey, for its part, attempted to mediate between the US and Iran in 2009-2010 directly on the nuclear question, fully sharing the goal of preventing Teheran from developing military nuclear weapons—seen as a

threat not only to Western security but to Turkey itself. This role was appreciated and actually urged by the Obama administration. When the Iranian regime suppressed demonstrations after the June 2009 presidential elections, however, the AKP government was among the first to recognize the re-elected president, and, unlike Italy, avoided public condemnation of the bloodshed. More critically, while the Obama administration gradually concluded that engagement did not work, or at least would never deliver if not accompanied by coercive measures such as sanctions, Turkey continued to believe in the potential of dialogue without coercion. The “nuclear fuel deal” signed in May 2010 by Turkey, Brazil and Iran—although similar in many respects to one earlier promoted by the US in the fall of 2009—was criticized in Washington and in Europe as undermining efforts to build a global consensus on a policy of isolation of the Iranian leadership.<sup>45</sup> Turkey was accused in various Western capitals of ‘de-alignment’. Turkish leaders argued instead that their objective has invariably remained that of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons in a way that avoids a drift towards military confrontation.<sup>46</sup> As a country with close ties with Turkey and with a similar view of the Iranian problem, Italy was asked by the Obama administration to pressure Ankara to vote together with the other members of the UN Security Council in the run up to the adoption of a new UN resolution demanding sanctions. This attempt clearly failed.<sup>47</sup> The “no”

vote of Turkey in the UNSC marked a low point in US-Turkish relations and engendered tensions in Western-Turkish relations more broadly. The more recent process of convergence in the context of the Arab Spring, most notably Turkish-Iranian divergent responses to the crisis of the Assad regime in Syria and Ankara's decision to deploy an early warning radar system in Turkey in the framework of the NATO missile defense architecture has helped a great deal in extinguishing anxieties about Turkish-Iranian engagement that were manifested in Western capitals in 2010. As the region remains in flux and Turkish foreign policy under constant review, however, new divergences in Turkish-Western approaches to Iran and other Middle Eastern actors are not to be ruled out.

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Another area in which the limits of the Italian-Turkish strategic convergence have become apparent is the Arab-Israeli peace process and attitudes towards Israel in particular. Both countries have long been committed to a solution of what they see as the central source of instability in the Middle East. Both, as already pointed out, have worked to limit the spread of conflict, as evidenced by their engagement in Lebanon. Both,

finally, have worked for the solution of humanitarian emergencies and poverty among Palestinians. While Italy has remained a committed ally of Israel even in the presence of growing international isolation of Jerusalem, however, Turkey has changed its policy towards Israel since the Gaza offensive of December 2008. Turkish-Israeli bilateral relations have moved from good, to fraying in 2010, to zero in 2011.<sup>48</sup> The debate is open on whether this has been the case.

Critics of Turkey, in Rome as in other Western capitals, sometimes see this dangerous shift towards open rivalry as the manifestation of a larger "shift of axis" in Turkey's foreign policy motivated by Muslim solidarity and a re-appreciation of Turkey's alleged "Islamic vocation".<sup>49</sup> According to this view, Ankara would have an interest in the isolation of Israel and a weakening of the West's standing in the region. Ankara has contended that, on the contrary, the deterioration of Turkey-Israeli relations has been caused by Israel's increasingly uncompromising approach to foreign relations.<sup>50</sup> The Gaza offensive undercut Turkey's role as a mediator between Israel and its rival Syria. This was a particularly negative development as the Turkish government was apparently not informed of the launch of the military operation. Turkish officials therefore felt bypassed and humiliated at a very delicate moment of what they saw as a generous and demanding mediation effort. The Gaza embargo and the policy of *divide et impera* over Palestinians pursued by Israel since then have made

the possibility of a peace agreement much harder while giving Israel’s rivals, such as Iran, a justification for a policy of even greater assertiveness and arm-wrestling with the West. All this, according to Turkish officials, has not only seriously affected Israel’s image in the world, but also discredited Jerusalem as one of Turkey’s key partners in regional stability. With the so-called “flotilla crisis” of May 2010, which claimed the lives of several Turkish citizens by Israeli security forces, and failure to reach reconciliation thereafter, Turkish-Israeli relations have come to a complete breakdown.

Italy, by contrast, has seen bilateral relations with Israel warm up in recent years, with the Berlusconi governments in particular striving to present Rome as Israel’s “number-one European friend”.<sup>51</sup> The reasons for this are to be found in the international as much as in the domestic context (part of the Italian center-right has become resolutely pro-Israel as a consequence of both its pro-Americanism and its fears of Islamic politics in the region). Consequences have been tangible. Italy’s stance on the “flotilla crisis”, in which Rome was skeptical about the establishment of an independent international investigation commission as proposed by Turkey, irritated Turkish officials.<sup>52</sup> Italy’s position on Israel and Palestine in the context of the most recent attempt by Palestinian authorities to gain statehood recognition at the UN has also highlighted very significant divergences with Turkish policy. In fact, Italy’s friendships with both Israel and Turkey have clearly been

put to a test by recent developments. For the time being, the Italian government has downplayed the problem, stressing the positive role that Rome wants to play as a facilitator of dialogue among all Mediterranean and Middle-East actors. Doubts are growing, however, on whether this approach can be maintained in the presence of exacerbating Turkish-Israeli divisions.

## Conclusion: A Look Ahead

The recent Arab uprisings have added great uncertainty and fluidity to already highly unstable international relations in the MENA region. Main regional players are struggling to chart a new course, taking into account the new challenges to security and peace as well as the new opportunities for stabilization and development through democratization that the crumbling regional order offers. Both in America and in Europe, the widespread view is that Turkey will be an even more prominent factor in the new strategic and security equation of the new Middle East, and that Western-Turkish engagement is therefore necessary and of great strategic importance. In this context, Italy has been among the most outspoken in Europe about the need for closer strategic coordination between Ankara and EU capitals, pending progress in the accession process, in their respective policies and initiatives towards the southern neighborhood.<sup>53</sup> The opinion in Rome is that Turkey can be a key partner in the EU’s effort to support the ongoing political transitions. Turkey’s influence is also seen as critical

to put pressure on those regimes that by refusing to adopt reforms are left with the prospect of protracted domestic unrest and conflict.

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As much as Italy and Turkey will undoubtedly find new opportunities for cooperation in the new context, the logic of the “Arab Spring” seems to be only reinforcing trends highlighted earlier, including Turkey’s ascent to a position of influence in the region that European countries traditionally engaged across the Mediterranean, such as Italy, will hardly match. In some cases, Italy will find it useful to seek greater coordination with Turkey, and to promote such cooperation in the European context, as a way to advance its national interests and the EU’s. In others, such as post-Gaddafi Libya, cooperation will develop side by side with competition for influence and economic advantage. While Italy seems set to maintain a leading position among European countries engaged in Libya, Ankara will try to leverage its historically closer ties with the local elites in Benghazi, currently leading the transition effort, to build a stronger economic and political relationship with new Libya than the one that it had developed with the Gaddafi regime. This could over time alter the balance of foreign influence in the country, including as concerns the highly lucrative

oil market. Italian-Turkish cooperation, also as a way to offset France’s regional influence and possible advances in Libya and elsewhere, is a possibility, but will encounter problems if taken too far. Rome needs full support from France in the EU context as long as it remains economically and financially weak.

More broadly, Turkey will use its newly gained status as a prominent Muslim regional power and its appeal as a fast developing economy to further its influence, partly “stealing the scene” from European countries in the region for which power projection in the area will require greater work. This will not necessarily lead Italy to downgrade its partnership with Turkey or to end its sponsorship of Turkey’s EU membership in Brussels, but it may nonetheless create greater fluidity in the relationship. As attention shifts even further from what Italy and the EU can do for Turkey to what Turkey and the EU can do together, the Italian elites’ major preoccupation will indeed have to be finding ways to adjust what has become over the years a very valuable partnership to the new international realities. In other words, although still conceived of in a wider European framework and aimed at larger international results, the development of the “strategic partnership” between Italy and Turkey will require in the months and years ahead an even more prominent bilateral component focused on the reaffirmation of mutual interests over emerging divergences.

## Endnotes

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- 21 The Vatican stresses that it cannot and it will not have an official position on Turkey-EU relations as this would mean interfering in EU affairs. The Holy See has, however, often intervened or even sought a prominent role in the classic controversial debate on Europe’s ‘roots’ and borders.
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