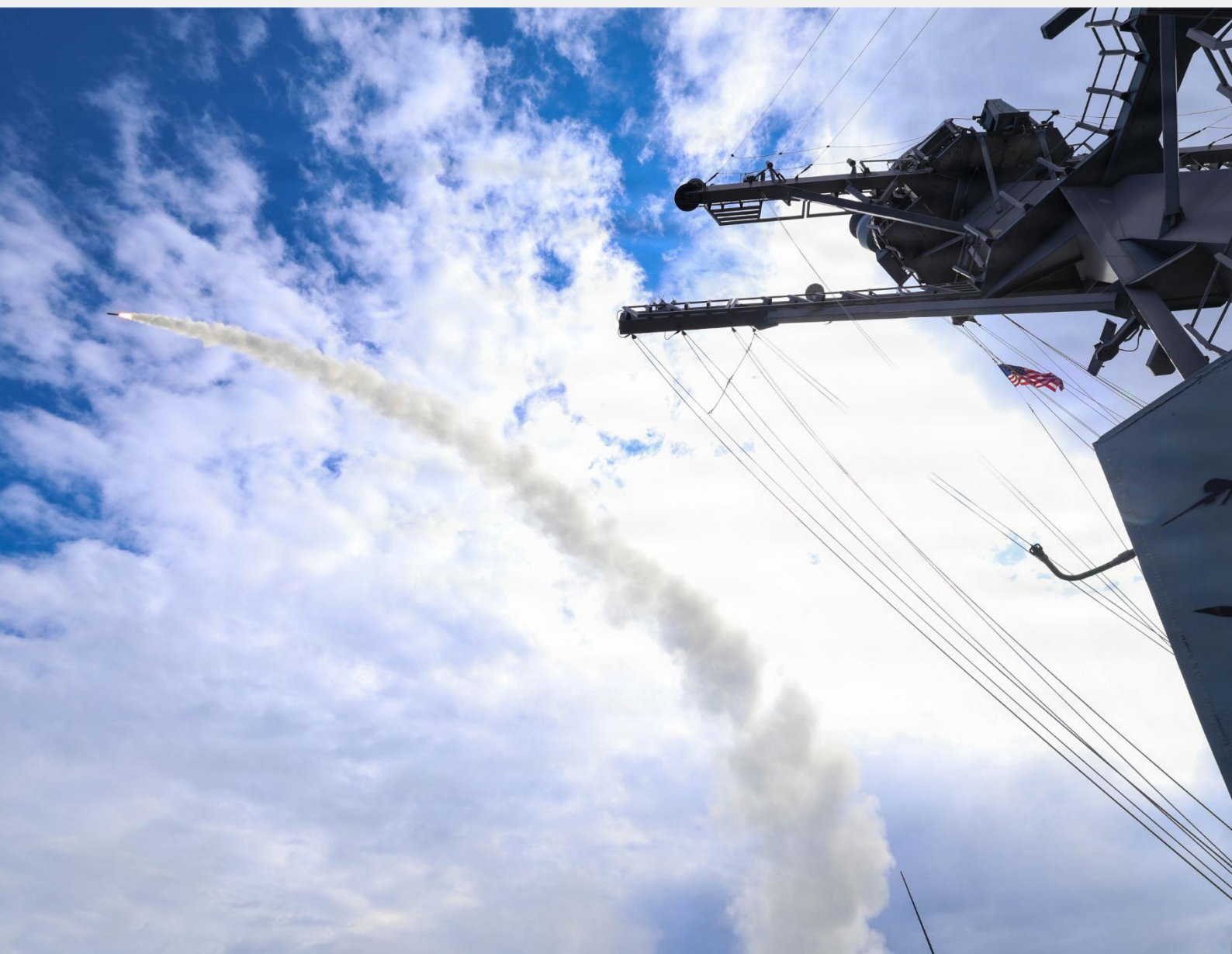


The War in the Middle East and Turkey's Foreign Policy Alignment (March 2026)

Dragoș C. Mateescu





The War in the Middle East and Turkey's Foreign Policy Alignment (March 2026)¹

Dragoș C. Mateescu²

Analyst, Romanian Diplomatic Institute

Policy Brief Series no. 87 / 2026

Published by: Romanian Diplomatic Institute

ISSN: 2066-5989

Abstract

It does not appear premature to analyse the immediate consequences of the major conflict in the Middle East, in early March 2026, that resurfaced with the air strikes initiated by the United States of America and Israel upon certain targets in Iran. The present approach firstly underlines the context of this conflict. It is important to take into account that it comes amid growing US involvement in the Middle East, within a seven-year span, as orchestrated during the first term of office of the current US president Donald Trump (January 2017 – January 2021) and continued in his second term of office (inaugurated in January 2025). This analysis will be concentrated upon the immediate effects of the attacks initiated on the 28th of February 2026, as well as on Turkey's positioning regarding these developments, as an important regional actor and NATO member with high relevance for Romania.

Keywords: Iran, US, Israel, conflict, Turkey, NATO.

¹ This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

² dragos.mateescu@idr.ro

INTRODUCTION. BACKGROUND

When US and Israeli armed forces attacked Iranian targets, on the morning of 28 of February 2026, the regional context was already marked by significant American initiatives. They indicated a major change in strategy, from an approach dominated by security concerns to one in which commercial interests are of equivalent importance. It all began with the Abraham Accords, through which Washington aligned with the efforts of regional states to adopt development schemes beyond their historical dependence on oil and natural gas extraction. From the American perspective, such schemes were, from the outset, based on regional cooperation, and Israel's role was inevitably pivotal in this strategic context.

The first Trump administration capitalised on this reality and supported from the very outset not only the Abraham Accords, but also tangible regional cooperation initiatives, with important geostrategic significance, conceptualised to facilitate the long-term implementation of the Accords. To put it briefly, this entailed the participation of all predominantly Muslim states from the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and North Africa in lucrative forms of cooperation, under the condition of formal recognition of the State of Israel. Among those projects, the most ambitious is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Alongside this, and displaying a certain degree of complementarity, stands the project to connect the electricity grids and substantial natural gas reserves of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa to Europe, via Cyprus, Crete, and Greece.

In the same regional context, it must also be addressed the Biden administration's efforts (2021-2025), but above all, the efforts of the current Trump administration, for ending conflicts and extending cooperation in the extended region of the Middle East, the South Caucasus and North-East Africa. The critical intervention of the White House, leading to the historic peace treaty signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Washington on 8 August 2025, signalled the start of an important process of regional cooperation with potential benefits worldwide. The integration of Greece and the wider Balkan region, extending to encompass Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine, is becoming an increasingly central feature of this process. All these factors attract important investments, not only from Washington, but also from the European Union (EU), because the strategic benefits appear to be substantial.

Moreover, American and European investments ultimately result in eliminating the Chinese competition along the Middle and Southern transport corridors, together with the termination of Russia's energy stronghold, a grip that has already had catastrophic historical consequences for Europe (Mateescu, 2026).

Iran has long stood as the primary driver of instability across the wider Middle East, from the South Caucasus to the Eastern Mediterranean, and onward to the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb and Hormuz. The persistent backing it provides to the Houthi rebels in Yemen has long compromised the security of commercial shipping through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait into the Red Sea, and through the Suez Canal to Europe. The Strait of Hormuz, currently blocked by Tehran, is also crucial for global trade, particularly involving oil and liquefied natural gas shipments from the Persian Gulf towards Europe, as well as to China, India, Japan and other big economies of the Far East (Sağlam, 2026). This is compounded, of course, by Iran's existential backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon, which has contributed to the chronic instability of this country and the terrorist operations of the Hamas group. It must be recalled that this organisation has systematically undermined attempts to pacify the Gaza region by launching attacks against Israel, with the infamous assault on 7 October 2023 representing only the climax of this policy of regional destabilisation.

THE US-ISRAEL ALLIANCE VERSUS THE IRANIAN THREAT

The US-Israeli bombardments of Iranian military facilities between 13 and 24 June 2025, as well as those initiated on 28 February 2026, aim not only to eliminate the nuclear threat posed by this state, but also to decisively weaken the Tehran regime. For years, this political establishment provided robust and aggressive support to its anti-Israeli and anti-Western proxies in Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen. For Israel, the attacks represent a matter of necessity. For Washington, they also serve to push the Chinese and Russian competition, whose presence in the region has been heavily supported by Iran for a long time. After the removal of the Islamic Republic's leadership, the only final goal of the US-Israeli military operation seemed to be the permanent and unconditional surrender of the Tehran regime.

The immediate consequences of these developments are already tangible for the region and the entire world, but the medium and long-term effects are just as important. While there is a clear risk that shipping through the Strait of Hormuz could be blocked forever, this is likely

less important than the benefits of the US establishing itself as the main leader in the broader region for the long term, in the logic and geographical scheme indicated above. Furthermore, blocking traffic through the strait could make the US an even more important global supplier of oil and liquefied gas than it already is. This could mean a simultaneous reduction in the market footprint of Iran, as well as other Persian Gulf exporters, namely Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia (Butler and Mann, 2026; Sağlam, 2026). This is also partly why hostility is growing between Iran and these countries as regional tensions increase.

At the time of writing, in the first week of March 2026, the US-Israeli attacks seemed to have permanently degraded the chain of command, led at the time by Supreme Leader Khamenei, as well as Iran's air defence systems. Tehran's retaliation, with drones and missiles fired at targets in Cyprus and the mostly Sunni states from the Persian Gulf, showed that their coordination was quite weak. Moreover, those actions made it easier for the Israeli and US armed forces to identify and destroy many launch sites. As President Trump himself announced at the time, another major wave of bombings was to follow, which was planned to completely cripple Iran's military might. In the end, Iran's air defences were so thoroughly destroyed that old B-52 bombers begun operating with almost total freedom (Al Arabiya, 2026). Following several rounds of talks, the situation seemed to reach a stalemate and now, toward the middle of 2026, there is no end of hostilities in sight. The Hormuz is mostly blocked and attacks continue from both sides.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the regime will survive. No matter who the identity of the Supreme Leader, the real power behind this Islamist regime lies with the Revolutionary Guards, and there are currently no clear signs of a permanent breakdown in the state's repressive apparatus, which the Guards fully control. It will likely take a long time before the fanatics making up this structure are removed, if it ever happens at all.

On the other hand, military analysts universally agree that the strikes have severely degraded Tehran's capability to continue supporting Russia's illegal and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, particularly with Shahed drones. The strikes are also expected to heavily disrupt Iran's ability to sponsor Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen. If the ultimate objective of the US-Israeli campaign is achieved in the end, i.e. the unconditional surrender of the Tehran regime, such an outcome could eliminate the Iranian threat on a global scale, including its nuclear dimension. This constitutes a threat that has been

explicitly articulated over the years by the regime and its religious elite, directed precisely at the West, of which both Europe and Romania are part. Within this context, Turkey plays its own distinct role, however, its regional ambitions appear to be increasingly eclipsed, alongside those of Iran and its allies.

ANKARA'S POSITIONING

The Erdoğan-AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP; Justice and Development Party) regime, in power in Turkey since January 2002, has exhibited a rather incoherent foreign policy stance since the 2010-2012 period, when the initial signs of its authoritarianism began to emerge. On the one hand, the leadership in Ankara recognised the advantages of fostering closer ties with the European Union and the United States. On the other hand, however, it manifested hostility towards the West in general, a reflex of the Islamic conservatism in which the country's current leaders were raised. The authoritarianism currently practiced by Ankara has deeply reinforced this hostile stance, as evidenced by numerous examples gathered over the last decade. Against this background, Turkey's relationship with the European Union remains rather precarious, while its ties with the US continue to be adversely affected by several issues. Chronologically, the first of these was the Halkbank case, in which American prosecutors accused Turkey of systematically helping Iran to evade Washington's sanctions (Mateescu, 2018; Cetinguc, 2026; Yeşilada, 2026). Then came the acquisition of S-400 missile systems from the Russian Federation, which have yet to be returned despite explicit and repeated US requests to that effect. Moreover, Turkey's disruptive stance towards American imperatives in Syria and Iraq, its hostile attitude towards Israel, Greece and Cyprus, its involvement in the South Caucasus, and its positioning in certain disputes across Africa have caused additional friction.

In the current context, the leader in Ankara has not shown restraint, making declarations that, in turn, cannot go unnoticed in Washington. Regarding the US-Israeli strikes on Iran, he stated that they represent a 'clear violation of international law' (Reuters, 2026) and of Iranian sovereignty, while publicly expressing his grief over the killing of Ayatollah Khamenei (Daily Sabah, 2026). On 3 March, Erdoğan reiterated before a large audience in Ankara that the US-Israeli strikes on Iranian targets were the result of 'provocations by the Zionist lobby' (Sabah, 2026). In the majority of his statements, the Turkish president, alongside his Foreign Minister,

Hakan Fidan (Anadolu, 2026), also condemned Iran's 'flawed strategy' of indiscriminately attacking predominantly Sunni Muslim countries.

All these indicate a certain degree of frustration in Ankara regarding what is perceived as US interference in a region where the Turkish leader considered himself entitled to act with near-total freedom. This manner is similar to the resistance shown by Iran and its allies towards Western interference in their respective regions. The authoritarian regime in Ankara exhibits the very same reflex. However, the American factor currently prevails across virtually all fronts where Turkey once appeared to dominate. In the South Caucasus, the personal involvement of Donald Trump has transformed the Azerbaijan-Armenia dispute, once largely controlled by Turkey, into an American affair. Within Turkey itself and in Syria, the US Ambassador to Ankara and President Trump's envoy for Syria, Tom Barrack, has succeeded in imposing the American agenda, as warned since the beginning of last year (Mateescu, 2025). Turkey is attempting to resist American primacy in the region, but is unable to halt it, as evidenced by its resistance to US-supported megaprojects involving Greece and Cyprus, including the IMEC, all of which serve to advance Washington's strategic competition with China (Mateescu 2026).

The US-Israeli strikes in Iran have caused deep concern in Ankara. They demonstrate that the Trump-Netanyahu tandem operates in alignment when a tangible threat to the interests of both nations arises. This anxiety is further heightened by the fact that Turkey has been locked in a persistent dispute with the Netanyahu government for several years now. Even the Israeli opposition, i.e. former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, described Turkey as a threat to the State of Israel, framing it as part of an 'emerging radical Sunni axis' (Speakman Cordall, 2026). Bennett stands a strong chance of returning to the premiership in the upcoming elections this November.

For the reasons outlined above, the US-Israeli demonstration of force can only cause discomfort in Ankara, even if it remains highly unlikely that Iran would ever target sites in Turkey given that a sustained attack would trigger a NATO response under Article 5 of the Treaty. Far more serious, however, are the commercial disruptions created by the strikes on Iranian targets. Turkey imports over 10% of its natural gas requirements from Iran and also relies on its eastern neighbour for the transit of gas imports from the Caspian region, particularly Turkmenistan. Regarding oil, although imports from Iran are restricted, a closure of the Strait of Hormuz would cut Turkey off from other Persian Gulf producers, most notably

Qatar, thereby leaving it overwhelmingly dependent on imports from Russia (currently exceeding 60%), alongside those from Kazakhstan and Iraq (Sağlam, 2026).

In addition to these factors, significant inflationary pressures must also be taken into consideration. The conflict and the closure of Hormuz, coupled with attacks by the Tehran-sponsored Houthi rebels in Yemen on shipping through Bab-el-Mandeb, drive up prices simply by inflating global insurance rates. These risks fuel global inflation, with potentially devastating consequences for an already weakened economy like Turkey's, whose substantial trade deficit leaves it highly vulnerable to precisely these kinds of pressures. Indeed, the Turkish trade deficit is primarily driven by the high costs of importing technology, raw materials, and energy. Despite recent efforts to develop domestic technologies and diversify its energy sources, Turkey remains locked in the same paradigm of import dependence and the vulnerabilities associated with it. Any regional war, particularly one currently targeting Iran, could severely destabilise the country, with hard-to-calculate consequences for both the national economy and the ruling regime in Ankara.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al Arabiya, 2026, „US military deploys B-52 bombers for first time in Iran strikes”, 3 March, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2026/03/03/us-military-deploys-b52-bombers-for-first-time-in-iran-strikes>
- Butler, Gavin & Mann, Toby, 2026, „Strait of Hormuz: What happens if Iran shuts global oil corridor?” *BBC*, 3 March, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c78n6p09pzn0>
- Cetinguc, Cem, 2026, „Davutoğlu Admits: How Turkey Secretly Bypassed US Sanctions on Iran”, *PA Turkey*, 26 ianuarie, <https://www.paturkey.com/news/2026/davutoglu-admits-how-turkey-secretly-bypassed-us-sanctions-on-iran-27095/>
- Daily Sabah, 2026, „Erdoğan says ‘saddened’ by Khamanei’s death”, 1 March, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/erdogan-says-saddened-by-khamaneis-death/news>
- Anadolu, 2026, „Bakan Fidan: İran'ın hiçbir ayırım yapmadan körfez ülkelerini bombalaması yanlış bir strateji”, March 3, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/bakan-fidan-iranin-hicbir-ayrim-yapmadan-korfez-ulkelerini-bombalamasi-yanlis-bir-strateji/3848800>
- Mateescu, Dragoș C., 2018, „A dispărut un stat: „noua Turcie” și provocările viitorului ”, *Contributors*, 12 August, <https://www.contributors.ro/a-disparut-un-stat-noua-turcie-si-provocarile-viitorului/#:~:text=Dragos%20C.%20Mateescuhttp://people.ieu.edu.tr/en/dragoscmateescu.%20Profeso>

r%20cercet%C4%83tor%20invitat%2C%20Institutul,la%20Universitatea%20Bucure%C5%9Fi%20%C5%9Fi%20doctor%20in%20rela%C5%A3ii

Mateescu, Dragoș C., 2025, „Mediterranean of East and the Middle East after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria - opportunities for cooperation and regional provocations”, *Policy Paper nr. 42*, Institutul Diplomatic Român, https://www.idr.ro/publicatii/Mateescu_PP42_RO.pdf

Mateescu, Dragoș C., 2026, „China forțează SUA și UE să coopereze, în pofida disputelor generate de administrația Trump”, *Veridica*, 13 February, <https://www.veridica.ro/opinii/china-forteaza-sua-si-ue-sa-coopereze-in-pofida-disputelor-generate-de-administratia-trump>

Reuters, „Turkey's Erdogan says attacks on Iran are clear violation of international law”, 2 March, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-attacks-iran-are-clear-violation-international-law-2026-03-02/>

Sabah, 2026, „Başkan Erdoğan: Siyonist lobi tahrikiyle İran'a saldırı yapıldı”, 3 March, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2026/03/03/baskan-erdogandan-onemli-mesajlar>

Sağlam, Mühdan, 2026, „Global energy geopolitics in the grip of Hormuz and Turkey”, *Bianet*, 2 March, <https://bianet.org/yazi/global-energy-geopolitics-in-the-grip-of-hormuz-and-turkey-317245>

Speakman Cordall, Simon, 2026, „Turkish ‘threat’ talked up in Israel as Netanyahu focuses on new alliances”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 February, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/23/turkish-threat-talked-up-israel-netanyahu-focuses-new-alliances>

Yeşilada, Atilla, 2026, „New York Status Conference in Halkbank Case Postponed”, *PA Turkey*, 28 January, <https://www.paturkey.com/news/2026/new-york-status-conference-in-halkbank-case-postponed-27165/>



Our mission. The Romanian Diplomatic Institute (RDI) has the mission to make a substantial contribution to increasing the quality of Romanian diplomacy through training, further education, research, the development of critical and strategic thinking and international networking. A good foreign policy serves as a beneficial domestic policy.

Guiding principles: human resource development, professionalism, respect and dialogue, and responsibility for the community.

Based on the founding legal attributions of the RDI, the further development of the Institute is carried out, according to the needs identified in the MFA, along the following four directions:

- Training and further education of diplomats and other trainees;
- Deepening the research and expertise dimension on regional and functional issues;
- Operating the RDI as a think-tank of the MFA;
- Integration of the RDI into an international network of similar relevant institutes.

Author: Dragoș C. Mateescu is an expert at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute – Department of Expert Analysis, lecturer at the University of Bucharest, and author at *Veridica*.

RDI Policy Brief Series
ISSN 2066-5989
ISSN-L 2066-5989

Editing, layout, and graphics: Claudiu Codreanu

Cover photo:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Thomas_Hudner_supports_Operation_Epic_Fury_\(9542643\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:USS_Thomas_Hudner_supports_Operation_Epic_Fury_(9542643).jpg)

The Romanian Diplomatic Institute - IDR
<https://www.idr.ro/en/> | secretariat@idr.ro
Primăverii 17, Sector 1, Bucharest, 011972