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From Norms Taker to Norms Breaker: A Comparative Study of Turkey's Nuclear Discourses Before and After the Ostensible Coup of 2016

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of public statements made by Turkish government leaders, contrasting official attitudes on nuclear nonproliferation before and after the alleged military coup attempt in 2016. Significant developments in this period include deteriorating democracy and the rule of law in Turkey and the emergence of destabilizing foreign policy differences between Turkey and Western states. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also sought to consolidate domestic power and play a more assertive security role in the Middle East. This analysis of official statements reveals a distinct shift in Turkey's nonproliferation rhetoric after the 2016 coup. In particular, Turkish government ministers have grown increasingly critical of a perceived *double standard* in international nonproliferation efforts; they have also called for global nuclear disarmament despite hosting US nuclear weapons on Turkish soil. Changes in Turkey's commitment to global norms about nuclear nonproliferation, even where this is rhetorical, have a profound effect on the potential for regional proliferation in the Middle East. Accordingly, this article contextualizes official statements to explore Turkey's shifting policy toward nonproliferation and, in doing so, examines how and why nonproliferation discourses in Turkey are created and whether or not these reflect real policy change.

Keywords: Turkey, nuclear discourses, nonproliferation, disarmament, nuclear security, discourse practice, rhetoric, norms, Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, narratives, Erdoğan

1. Introduction

In September 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a controversial statement in which he appeared to set out Turkey's theoretical right to develop nuclear weapons, arguing that nuclear-armed states were being unacceptable in preventing Turkey¹ from obtaining them [1]. This statement represented a clear shift in Turkey's nuclear nonproliferation rhetoric. Ankara has historically taken an unequivocal stance against the possession and use of nuclear weapons, using language of restraint. Erdoğan was now alluding to not only the possibility of proliferation but obliquely to Turkey's right to possess them. Also notable during this period is the significant increase in statements issued by Turkey on nuclear proliferation and disarmament after having historically refrained from intervening in these matters.

Although Turkey's present nuclear capabilities are limited to the civilian nuclear sector and would be unsuitable for weapons development, nuclear weapons in a broad sense have been a significant topic in state policy discussions for many years [2]. On the one hand, Turkey is a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) [3], which commits all signatories to nonproliferation and nuclear-armed states to disarmament; on the other hand, Turkey is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member that formally hosts US nuclear weapons on its soil [4]. It has also been argued that Turkey's ongoing civilian nuclear energy and research programs and indigenous surface-to-surface missile development projects could theoretically form the initial elements of a potential future nuclear weapons program [5]—something that Ankara denies. Most commentators would see this outcome as highly unlikely, but the possibility exists that Turkey's civilian program could be used to develop a nuclear hedging strategy.

Turkey's more assertive international security approach is not a new concern. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Leon Fuerth wrote that if the survival of the Turkish nation could no longer be guaranteed by its security relationship with the US, then Turkey might "take on all the risks and costs of a nuclear weapons programme" [6]. Conditions mentioned by Fuerth for this situation eventuality included "doubts regarding the NATO guarantee of effective collective security," the "collapse of the nonproliferation regime and ensuing regional nuclear acquisitions," a "strong shift in Turkish public opinion toward a more Islamic or nationalist orientation," the "revival of Russian expansionism directed toward the reestablishment of dominance in the Caucasus and Caspian regions," the "creation of a power vacuum in the Middle East," and "permanent damage to US–Turkish relations" [6].

¹ The article refers to the nation state as *Turkey*, rather than *Türkiye*, given that most of the international community is still employing the old designation.

Moving forward a few years, Jessica Varnum [7] described how Turkey's national interests continued to favor nuclear restraint. Scholars also argued the only scenario that could change Turkey's interest in seeking nuclear weapons would be a fractured security relationship with NATO and the US [8]. Other scholars said a nuclear weapons pathway "would be wildly out of character" for Turkey [9]. Nevertheless, although the ruling elite is unlikely to seek to develop a nuclear weapon capability, they might potentially engage in nuclear hedging in the event that Turkey's political sovereignty became endangered. Scenarios in this event include Iran manifesting its nuclear weapon capability [10, 11]; relapse of the security situation in Iraq and Syria [12, 13]; a breakdown in relations with Russia or the European Union (EU); and waning of the security assurances given by NATO and of the US commitment to the strategy of extended nuclear deterrence [5]. Meanwhile, other reasons exist for states employing a hedging strategy, such as achieving status and bending to domestic pressures; also, there are multiple ways in which states may develop hedging strategies, as set out by Vipin Narang [14].

This situation brings us to the present. In recent years, Turkey has become increasingly assertive regionally and several times has contended that the nonproliferation regime is discriminatory [15]. Facing rising tensions with regional states, this emergent discussion of nuclear weapons at the government level is taking place within the context of it redeveloping the national, cultural, and political landscape. Turkey has also undergone significant deterioration in the rule of law and democracy as well as acute foreign policy differences with NATO and EU countries. Although Turkey's strategic direction began to shift after Erdoğan assumed the presidency in 2014, these changes accelerated after 2016 when an alleged military coup attempt took place.² Erdoğan used the aftermath of this event to consolidate his domestic control by purging the military and defense establishment of dissenting actors who opposed him. In 2017, Erdoğan received new powers through a constitutional referendum. This change has effectively allowed him to rule by decree since his 2018 reelection [16]. In May 2023, Erdoğan, against the odds—given the struggling economy and continuing refugee crisis—won another election, extending his tenure as modern Turkey's longest-serving leader.

Since the ostensible coup, Turkey has transformed from a parliamentary system into a unitary presidential constitutional republic, in which the president monopolizes power and wields absolute control over critical domestic and foreign policy decisions as both the head of state and of government [17]. Furthermore, Turkey's acquisition of S-400 missile systems from Russia has led to its exclusion from the F-35 Dual Capable Aircraft project required for deploying B-61 weapons (the US tactical or nonstrategic nuclear weapons stationed in Turkey). These forward-deployed weapons on the European continent are integral components of NATO's nuclear deterrence posture

² The authenticity of the coup has been disputed, and some have argued that the official storyline for events of July 15, 2016, was full of contradictions and gaps. See Cengiz, M. Who Was Behind the July 15, 2016 Military Uprising in Turkey? *Small Wars Journal* 2019. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/who-was-behind-july-15-2016-military-uprising-turkey>; Taş, H. The 15 July Abortive Coup and Post-Truth Politics in Turkey. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 2018, 18 (1), 1–19. DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2018.1452374.

[18]. The Biden Administration is already taking these issues into consideration as it navigates security relations with Turkey and NATO's nuclear umbrella.

Although external, strategic dynamics form an essential context for discussion about Turkey's stance on nonproliferation, statements coming from Turkey itself since the 2016 ostensible coup have not yet received significant attention. Accordingly, this article analyzes nuclear-related comments made by Turkish Government ministers, contrasting the rhetoric issued before and after 2016. Taking a loose discourse practice approach, we review Turkish Government discourses on nuclear issues within the context of Turkey's contemporary political and security landscape. In so doing, we discuss how statements are presented and explore their normative meanings to highlight differences between political rhetoric and actual policy change.

2. Methodology

The concept of norms has been under increasing focus in international relations literature in recent years [19, 20]. Norms are relevant to how states adhere to the rules-based international order, including in the way that states employ discourse strategies to validate and promote globally recognized, rules-based conventions such as the NPT. In addition to international legal agreements, norms shape interpersonal relations between leaders, and in doing so, they can foster trust between states [21]. Thus, norms can be constructed in discourses not only in actions, and morality can arise from discursive practices, which German philosopher Jürgen Habermas coined "discourse ethics" [22]. Norms are particularly relevant in the case of Turkey's nonproliferation rhetoric, as this article will demonstrate, because the post-2016 shift in the government's discursive practices indicated a willingness to break the norms constructed around the rules-based international order of the NPT regime.

Scholars have shown that nuclear proliferation arises from states harboring nuclear ambitions to bolster national security against perceived foreign threats, to develop normative symbols of a state's modernity and identity, or to satisfy demands of partisan domestic and bureaucratic constituencies [23, 24]. In the case of Turkey, nuclear issues have historically almost always been discussed in an energy context. Turkey imports nearly all its gas and oil, meaning the country is heavily dependent on international agreements and infrastructure to meet its energy needs and economic growth agenda [25]. However, rather than examining Turkey's position on nuclear proliferation from a technical perspective [26], this article seeks to examine the government's nuclear rhetoric on its own terms. We argue that there is value in closer scrutiny of primary source materials because individual leaders will not only be influenced by the "why" (such as environment, economy or defense issues) but also the "when" and "how" [27]. In our discussion, we highlight which nuclear-related statements by government leaders received more attention than others and how volume and frequency changed over time.

Nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament are not common topics of official public discussion in Turkey (although they have increased in frequency in recent years), so we found the scope of available comments to be modest but nonetheless of sufficient quantity and qualitative relevance for analysis. Our review focuses on three types of

discourses: official declarations, political speeches, and engagement with the Turkish and foreign press. We observed that these discourses had high-level political authority, reached a wide audience, and included personal interactive elements such as argumentation and narrative creation [28]. Comparing sources in this way draws out themes and patterns and exposes how language can be manipulated to control public perceptions as well as provide additional, often politically motivated, meaning to information [29].

To produce a comprehensive analysis, we used an internet search engine, searching in both English and Turkish for the relevant government and military narratives. Additionally, we conducted separate searches on various state-run websites, including the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Turkish Presidency website. These primary data focused on the period from 2003 onward when Erdoğan first came to power as Turkish prime minister. Results relevant to the analysis dated from 2006, with the majority of these falling between 2016 and 2020.³ The specific and contextual nature of this study did not call for big data techniques such as data mining and automated content analysis [30].

We were interested in maintaining a contextual constant for the time frame under analysis rather than focusing on any one individual. Therefore, we explored activities of all relevant government and military representatives. The search revealed that the key government ministers who made statements on nonproliferation and disarmament were Abdullah Gül (president, 2007–2014), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (prime minister, 2003–2014; president, 2014–present), Ahmet Davutoğlu (minister of Foreign Affairs, 2009–2014; prime minister, 2014–2016), Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (minister of Foreign Affairs, 2015–present), Taner Yıldız (minister of Energy and Natural Resources, 2009–2015) and Fatih Dönmez (minister of Energy and Natural Resources, 2018–present). We found that neither the minister of Defense nor any high-level military leader commented on nonproliferation or disarmament in any domestic or international forums.

Our search concentrated on the keyword “Turkey” in combination with the keywords “proliferation” (*yaygınlaşma*), “non-proliferation” (*yayılmayı önleme*), “security” (*güvenlik* or *emniyet*), “nuclear” (*nükleer*), “nuclear weapons/warheads” (*nükleer silah/başlık*), and “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) (*Kitle İmha Silahı*). We considered all applicable results, including reporting in Turkish and other media and the repetition of identical or similar statements. Primary categories of the resulting data were, in order of frequency (with the highest first), a “double standard” view regarding nuclear weapons, concerns about Iran and Israel’s nuclear programs, a vision for a nuclear weapon-free world, a stance against WMD, and perceived Western bias against Turkey’s nuclear energy program.⁴ These categories reflect some of the conditions laid out by Fuerth [6], as outlined previously, such as the deteriorating relationship between Turkey and the EU,

³ The study took 2006 as its start point because of the controversial comments made by a four-star general on a nuclear arms competition, and 2022 was when this article was started.

⁴ Inevitably, there was some crossover in statements fitting multiple categories, but this did not affect the overall research findings.

NATO and the US, as well as growing concerns about conflict, security risks, and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

In our analysis, we have drawn on concepts used in discourse analysis, including interactional sociolinguistics [31, 32], with a particular focus on the discourse practice element. By this focus, we mean that we have studied the language in relation to its social context—where was a speech held or a text published, and if there is any significance in the time that these statements were made, as well as the background and position of the individual making them. Discourses emerge from social processes, and they are produced through social actions and social organization. In other words, discourse never represents static facts; rather, it plays a pivotal role in constructing the world as we perceive it [33]. Although our article is concerned with discourses and narratives, it does not strictly fall within the field of critical discourse analysis because we did not systematically engage in an analysis of the social or discursive practices at play,⁵ nor did we prioritize the centrality of discourses in how human subjects experience and understand themselves and others, following the poststructuralist tradition.⁶ Nevertheless, we did consider social and discursive practices at play as well as how individuals constitute themselves and others. As such, this article can be understood as presenting a loose discursive approach to highlight how Turkish Government discourses reflect a growing willingness to break with nonproliferation norms.

To understand the meaning of language, we must examine how and why things appear the way they do, how decisions are made or actions become possible, and ways in which meaning is generated and circulated [34]. Discourses are also affected by the audience—for example, other countries, domestic groups, and non-state actors—as well as the setting—for example, the political environment, information freedom, and cultural customs [35]. Of specific interest to nuclear decision-making is that a discourse practice approach sees historical events as emerging problematizations of established regimes of practice, and it emphasizes the link between knowledge and power [36]. Taking these factors into consideration helps to disentangle meanings when a nonproliferation statement in the Turkish context is political rhetoric (for example, winning support for something but where there is no meaningful plan for implementation) and when it may represent genuine policy change.

3. Mapping the Evolution of Turkey's Nuclear Rhetoric

The statements under analysis are presented over three sections in the article, broadly in chronological order. The first section addresses apparent inconsistencies in the international community's activities on nonproliferation and disarmament agreements. Turkish ministers have repeatedly expressed their criticism toward the conflicting stance of the international community but until 2016 remained diplomatic in tone. The second section highlights the audience for Turkey's statements on nonproliferation, analyzing differences between domestic and international settings in the articulation of these. The

⁵ See, for instance, the work of Norman Fairclough.

⁶ See, for instance, the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

third section focuses on changes in Turkey's nonproliferation rhetoric following the alleged coup attempt in 2016, after which statements made by Turkish Government ministers became increasingly antagonistic in tone and content.

a. The Double Standard

The Turkish Government has historically advocated not only for a nuclear weapon-free Middle East but a nuclear weapon-free world. However, in recent years, there have been several occasions in which ministers have accused the international community of employing a double standard in nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. In particular, Western approaches to proliferators are not perceived by the Turkish Government to be objective or fair. Examples of this perceived imbalance are the West's supposedly more flexible nonproliferation responses to India, Pakistan, and Israel versus its supposedly less flexible responses to Libya, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. However, there is a broader hinterland to the double standard discourse for Turkey. In response to its disappointment with the lack of progress on the EU accession process from the late 2000s, Ankara began adopting a new foreign policy approach that focused on prioritizing the national interest ahead of identities given to it by Western powers, as first articulated in Davutoğlu's 2001 book, *Strategic Depth* [37]. The double standard discourse was not so much about advocating that peripheral states nuclearize but rather that they be treated more equitably within the international system.

Turkey's criticism of this apparent double standard became the subject of increased public debate at the beginning of the century, when two particular issues influenced Turkish threat perceptions at the regional level. The first was growing tension between Turkey and the US over the invasion of Iraq, and the second was Iran's nuclear weapons program. When Turkey's Justice and Development Party (JDP/AKP) came to power in 2002, the Turkish Parliament voted against the deployment of US troops in Turkey as a northern front against Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces [38]. Bilateral relations were further strained when in 2003 US forces detained Turkish soldiers in Sulaymaniyah, a city in Iraq's Kurdish region [39]. Around the same time, Iran revealed the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities, including the Natanz enrichment complex and the Arak heavy-water production plant.⁷

These events preceded a notable increase in nuclear proliferation rhetoric by Turkish Government ministers. A prominent example is the 2006 farewell address of four-star General Hilmi Özkök, former chief of general staff of the Turkish military. Özkök publicly raised his concern regarding nuclear proliferation efforts in North Korea and the Middle East (though he did not state which Middle Eastern country). He emphasized that a nuclear arms competition could leave Turkey with a difficult choice between acquiring nuclear technology or losing its strategic advantage in the region [40]. At this time, the nuclear debate also started to feature in the speeches of Erdoğan, who was then prime minister. In a statement he gave to journalists in 2009—during a period when Western pressure on Iran's nuclear program was increasing—he said Turkey was “completely

⁷ In February 2006, Tehran ended its implementation of the Additional Protocol (the protocol provides additional tools to the International Atomic Energy Agency to strengthen safeguards agreements for verifying all nuclear material) and resumed enrichment at Natanz, which led to United Nations measures.

against nuclear weapons in the Middle East” [41]. This rhetoric was in line with official government policy, which supported a nuclear weapon–free Middle East and, more broadly, a nuclear weapon–free world. Nevertheless, there was now a more questioning attitude toward Western policy, with Erdoğan stating, “There are countries with nuclear weapons in the Middle East; for example, Israel. There is a difference; Israel is not a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency; Iran is a member. Moreover, phosphorus bombs were used in Gaza. What is this? Weapon of Mass Destruction...If we want global peace, we must be fairer and honest” [41]. This statement is the first reference to the rationale behind Turkey’s increasingly critical rhetoric on the double standard in the Western-led nonproliferation regime.

Another example of the growing focus on nuclear issues in Turkish Government discourses is the speech made by Gül in September 2010 at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. He said there could be no credible nonproliferation regime if the de facto existence of nuclear weapons in certain countries at the heart of the world’s most delicate regions was ignored [42]. Although Gül’s speech emphasized the need for consistent nuclear nonproliferation efforts in the Middle East, it was also an indirect criticism of the unequal international policy response to countries such as Israel and Iran. Moreover, Gül’s criticism can be interpreted as Turkey seeking to position itself as a mediator between Iran and the West [43]. The concept of a nuclear-free Middle East provided Turkey an opportunity to present itself as a model country following the norms and values of Western actors surrounding nonproliferation. This concept was reinforced by Barack Obama [44] at a joint press conference in Turkey with Gül a year earlier, where the US president referred to “a model partnership” between “a predominantly Christian nation” and “a predominantly Muslim nation”. Between 2006 and 2010, Turkey inserted itself into the international nuclear debate as a key international interlocutor that could connect the international nonproliferation regime and regional proliferators.

Turkey’s growing assertiveness, and by now its questioning attitude toward the international nonproliferation regime, was reflected in a speech made in November 2013 by Davutoğlu at the 60th Pugwash Science and International Relations Conference.⁸ Notably, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was also present. In his speech, Davutoğlu underlined that “WMD are a crime against humanity, wherever it is, by whomever they are owned, for which cause they are used” [45]. Davutoğlu diplomatically pointed out that the international community should adopt a unified stance against nuclear weapons and that all international actors should be treated equally. He reiterated Turkey’s commitment to a nuclear weapon–free zone in the Middle East, hinting that Israel must eliminate its nuclear weapons for the sustainability of peace and security in the region [45].

This speech included several important political themes: religion, morality, unconventional weapons as a crime against humanity, and collective security. Davutoğlu pointed to the fact that his country was not going to engage in any discourse averse to nonproliferation given that Turkey was a signatory of the NPT as well as

⁸ The Pugwash Conference, which took place in Turkey, has been the only nuclear-related conference to date attended by high-level officials from Turkey.

various other global conventions and international agreements (which meant that Turkey faced both international and legal restraints if it decided to explore any proliferation policies). However, the foreign minister then proceeded to engage in subtle criticism of existing nuclear states, saying, “if you want another country to eliminate nuclear weapons, first you have to do it,” emphasizing that nonproliferation should be a global endeavor [45].

At the same conference, Gül highlighted a growing sense of insecurity when discussing regional politics. He explained that this sentiment had been a driver for some countries to acquire so-called WMD, with the prospect of providing “an advantage in international and regional balances” [46]. Gül called for a unified stance against all unconventional weapons, including nuclear weapons, particularly in the Middle East. He said there should be no “tolerance of the de facto ownership of weapons of mass destruction of some countries”—an implicit reference to Israel as well as Syrian chemical weapons [46]. In this speech, it was not just nuclear weapons that were being discussed but also unconventional weapons in general. Notably, Gül used the term “appeal” rather than referring to a sense of necessity, suggesting that weapons seem to be a tempting option for some states, which goes beyond justification on purely deterrence or defense grounds. Gül also referred to the “ability” and “capability” of states, outlining how the security dilemma could initiate a chain reaction among Arab states—but leaving it ambiguous as to whether this would apply to Turkey as well. He referred to a “contradiction” of policies, wherein attainment of unconventional weapons is legitimate for some states but not for others. Gül finished by saying that the Middle East should be “stripped” of all WMD including nuclear weapons, ending on an assertive tone calling for the curtailment of unconventional weapons in the region as a whole [46].

Such speeches referring to the double standard primarily placed emphasis on international unity and cooperation to achieve nonproliferation objectives in both their broad content and specific word choice. Up until the mid-2010s, Turkey used its criticism of the double standard as a discourse strategy to promote nonproliferation norms and a nuclear weapon-free Middle East but, notably, not particularly advocating global nuclear disarmament. As such, Turkey was pursuing a calculated strategy of appealing to allies within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) grouping of states with its overt criticism of the West’s discriminatory policies toward the developing world while at the same time refraining from directly calling for global nuclear disarmament, which would have been controversial for bilateral relations with the US as its principal security patron.

b. An International Audience

Turkey’s double standard rhetoric grew more forceful after 2013 when accession talks with the EU became increasingly contentious. Negotiations on full membership, which started in 2005, had always been slow, but they stalled after 2016. The European Commission highlighted concerns about freedom of expression, respect for human rights, and independence of the Turkish judiciary system [47, 48]. This international political context ties in with Turkey’s increasing use of nonproliferation rhetoric—some statements were made specifically in relation to international criticisms of Turkey or with

an international audience in mind. An article published in *Die Welt* on September 21, 2014, controversially claimed that President Erdoğan had been pursuing a secret nuclear weapons program—and that he had already received centrifuges from Pakistan to enrich uranium [49]. Similar allegations dated back to the 1980s when Turkey and Pakistan were accused of the covert transfer of dual-use nuclear technology [50]. Denying the allegations in the German newspaper article, both the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Energy became publicly involved in the discussion.

First, Energy Minister Taner Yıldız refuted the allegations, categorically denying that Turkey had the intention or capability to develop nuclear weapons. He said, “This article is part of *Die Welt*’s effort to defame Turkey internationally” [51]. Taking a closer look at his chosen words, Yıldız used the terms “desire,” “effort,” and “intention” (the latter twice), suggesting that he was keen to reiterate that Turkey was not interested in acquiring nuclear weapons. Yıldız went as far as to say that Turkey “does not even possess a research reactor,” which was not true. In 2014, the Turkish Atomic Energy Authority reactor was indeed offline, but Istanbul Technical University was operating a TRIGA Mark II reactor. Here, it appeared Yıldız was going to such lengths to emphasize that Turkey had no interest in nuclear proliferation and that he understated the country’s actual nuclear capacity; he was attempting to provide assurance to the international community that Turkey could not cross the nuclear threshold and had no intention to do so. Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tanju Bilgiç, also rejected *Die Welt*’s accusations, although his words were more measured in tone than those of Yıldız. To counter the claims, Bilgiç drew attention to Turkey’s commitment to the NPT. Bilgiç placed Turkey as a pivotal actor in the Middle East in the context of the nuclear order. He stated that “Turkey sees the goal of transforming the Middle East into a weapons of mass destruction–free zone as a priority” [52].

Turkey’s defensive externally targeted rhetoric was reignited in April 2015 during a meeting on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, an international US-led initiative aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear program. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu reiterated his message about nuclear weapons in a discussion with his US counterpart, Secretary of State John Kerry. He pointed out that Turkey never had the intention to develop nuclear weapons themselves and opposed Iran’s or any neighboring country’s efforts along this pathway. The tone of this statement is one of reassurance, tailored to a US and international audience. In addition to Iran, Çavuşoğlu mentioned “any neighbouring country,” providing assurance that Turkey’s commitment to nonproliferation extended to the entire region—which would also include states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel [53].

Erdoğan’s first international speech concerning nonproliferation took place following the last Nuclear Security Summit, held in April 2016 in Washington, DC. Erdoğan spoke about the necessity of building a fully nuclear weapon–free world while reiterating Turkey’s commitment to maintain nuclear power plant (NPP) projects to maintain nuclear energy for peaceful purposes [54]. This message was a notable intervention on the subject of nuclear disarmament because the summit represented a significant gathering of world leaders. Two weeks later, back in Turkey, Erdoğan criticized the

European Parliament's decision to call on Turkey to halt the Akkuyu NPP project over environmental concerns. He presented Europe's criticism about the NPP project as bias against the country and its successful economy [55]. Compared with previous years, all these comments marked a notable increase in official statements on nonproliferation coming from Turkey. Notably, this last comment by Erdoğan was made at a meeting for *mukhtars* (i.e., the highest elected authority of a village), who form the lowest-level administrative body in Turkey, indicating that the nuclear agenda was by now being pursued for the consumption of domestic constituents. Furthermore, up until this point, Turkey had addressed nonproliferation and peaceful uses of nuclear energy in the context of international norms while emphasizing the country's participation in international agreements. This discourse strategy implied that Turkey attached significant value to the way in which the country was viewed by the international community. Now, in addition to widening the audience to domestic constituents, Turkey was starting to allude to the arguably more controversial topic of global nuclear disarmament.

c. The Inflection Point

Following the restructuring of the Turkish state after the alleged attempted coup in July 2016, Turkey continued its rhetoric on a nuclear-free Middle East. However, statements shifted relating to international cooperation on nonproliferation. The frequency and volume of these comments increased, and the tone changed from compliance with Western nuclear nonproliferation norms to a more defiant and antagonistic stance. In August 2017, in response to a question about strained relations between the US and North Korea, Erdoğan overtly criticized the nuclear weapon states [56]. In September 2017, Erdoğan made a further intervention by commenting that states with the most powerful WMD capacity were telling Turkey not to develop its own such weapons [57]. He called on those states that possessed thousands of nuclear warheads to pioneer nonproliferation efforts—starting with themselves engaging in disarmament for the benefit of the whole humanity. Notably, both sets of remarks were made domestically: the first while Erdoğan was answering journalists' questions in Istanbul and the second at an JDP meeting in the capital Ankara.

In November 2017, Erdoğan gave a speech at the International Technology Addiction Congress in Istanbul, which can be considered a forum somewhat irrelevant to the nuclear debate. Yet here, he stated that nuclear weapons were contrary to Islam but also said, “unfortunately, the power war in the world requires you to have such weapons, even if you don't want to” [58]. It was now beginning to become typical for Erdoğan to make controversial statements on nuclear issues at domestic events and at those unrelated to nonproliferation rather than on the more compatible international stage.

Another example of this approach is a speech that Erdoğan gave via videoconference at the opening ceremony of Amasya Ring Road in July 2020 [59]. There, he remarked, “Those who try to nurture enmity towards, set a trap against us or block our way...will unfortunately themselves lose,” and he proceeded to comment on Turkish military intervention in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Erdoğan then voiced several general warnings to

those with negative attitudes toward Turkey, saying, “we will never allow anyone to encroach on our rights or interests.” Amasya is a small town in the north of Turkey—a curious place to be addressing diplomacy and international security. Yet in fact, this communication strategy has characterized Turkish elites for decades. Previous politicians, specifically President Turgut Özal (in power from 1989 to 1993), have brought up important issues at smaller fora to be able monitor reactions and enable them to revise their policies if required.

A more relevant platform for international security issues was the opening of the 72nd UN General Assembly in September 2017. There, Erdoğan reiterated that Turkey was categorically against all sorts of WMD and that nuclear weapons need to be eliminated globally [58]. Likewise, at the February 2018 Conference on Disarmament in the UN Geneva Office, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Yıldız underlined that Turkey’s ultimate goal was a nuclear-free world [60]. In April 2018, Çavuşoğlu attended the 18th Summit of the NAM in Azerbaijan. While he was answering questions from journalists about the Akkuyu NPP, which had officially opened earlier that month, Çavuşoğlu said Turkey was only seeking a “nuclear energy power plant, which has nothing to do with nuclear weapons.” He also said Turkey was completely against nuclear weapons everywhere and against privileged rights to have them [61]. These statements further support the argument that Turkey was employing two different lines of criticism regarding nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament during this period—more offensive at home than abroad.

The increase in commentary on nonproliferation and disarmament, combined with differences in the remarks made to domestic and international audiences, was now becoming more evident. At an *iftar* dinner with international diplomats in Ankara in May 2018, Erdoğan advocated that every country in the world had the right to fully use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes [62]. He criticized “those nations who have thousands of nuclear warheads, threatening others who have them.”⁹ Then, at a dinner of the Trabzon Elderly Protection Association held in Istanbul in June 2019, Erdoğan commented on ongoing Western criticism of Turkey’s peaceful NPP project. While Erdoğan spoke about nuclear energy, he underlined the double standard over energy and weapons, particularly where fingers were pointed at Turkey [63].

Among these interventions, two speeches by Erdoğan stand out in particular. The first was made on September 4, 2019, when Erdoğan addressed a group of business leaders in the eastern province of Sivas, praising the progress of the Turkish defense industry [1]. Here, he made some provocative references to nuclear weapons, almost seeming to imply that Turkey was interested in acquiring them: “Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But [they tell us] we cannot have them. This, I cannot accept. There is no developed nation in the world that does not have them. All of them have it...We are currently working on this.” Erdoğan also compared Turkey with “developed nations,” a common theme Turkey has used in debates about both nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. Erdoğan’s speech illustrated how he

⁹ These comments were made in relation to developments regarding the Iran nuclear deal and Jerusalem. See [62].

perceived nuclear weapons as a means to reinforce national status and prestige. Like Yıldız had done in 2014, Erdoğan did not opt for precision in his speech, with developed nations coarsely grouped into a pronuclear weapons camp. In reality, some developed nations are vehemently against nuclear weapons, such as Sweden and New Zealand. Meanwhile, although the US and Russia may have the total number of nuclear missiles cited in Erdoğan's speech, they do not possess this number separately [64]. Two possibilities exist for these errors: either Erdoğan was misinformed or he was applying a deliberate discourse strategy to highlight the gap between rich and poor states.

The fact that Erdoğan mentioned nuclear weapons while he was praising the progress of the Turkish defense industry is also meaningful. In his speech, Erdoğan seemed to boast about Turkey's decreased foreign dependency and said the country had indigenously developed armed uncrewed aerial vehicles and smart precision bombs after the US decided not to sell these capabilities to Turkey. Erdoğan's reference to nuclear weapons alongside these indigenously developed conventional war-fighting capabilities underlined the president's perceptions about the strategic necessity of self-sufficiency in countering emerging threats.

Erdoğan reiterated his message about the unfairness of the nonproliferation regime and inequality between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states in his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2019 [65]; the question is whether this statement was actually espousing a real policy option [66]. Turkish media, politicians, and analysts did not widely reflect on the meaning or intention of these speeches at the time. Instead, in-country reporting focused on reactions from the US and the broader international community. In response to Erdoğan's comments, Yaşar Yakış, a former Turkish foreign minister and founding member of the ruling JDP, emphasized in a media article that Turkey was a signatory to the NPT and there would be serious implications in acquiring nuclear weapons, including international sanctions [67]. At the same time, a researcher from the pro-JDP Turkish Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research controversially argued that Turkey's possession of nuclear weapons would decrease regional tensions because it would supposedly deter hostile nuclear weapon states from deploying them [68].

That the concern about the external response overshadowed internal policy debate is notable. On December 11, 2019, two US democratic senators introduced legislation that in effect would further deny Turkey access to developing nuclear weapons. The legislation was aimed at revoking the automatic renewal of 123 Agreements, which facilitate the peaceful transfer of nuclear materials and equipment from the US. The 123 Agreement with Turkey, signed in 2008, was due to be automatically renewed in 2023, but as a result of the congressional review, a prohibition was introduced on Turkey's enrichment of uranium or reprocessing of plutonium on its own territory [69]. Turkey's military intervention in Syria, Erdoğan's "open desire to acquire a nuclear weapon," and risks of arms race in the volatile Middle East were all listed as justifications for the bill [70].

In this article, we have analyzed both governmental discourses before and after the alleged 2016 coup, which together chart the evolution that Turkey has undergone in relation to its international security posture and nuclear posture. Turkey portrays itself as an influential international actor in the global nuclear order by being a signatory to international nonproliferation agreements, advocating for a nuclear-free Middle East, and acting as an interlocutor between the international community and regional proliferators. Turkey is critical of the apparent double standard applied to different countries in relation to dual-use technology and deterrence. Although domestically the nuclear debate tends to focus on energy and the economy, statements made in international settings increasingly point to Turkey's assertive nuclear stance. Until 2019, criticism by government ministers regarding international nuclear debates was primarily expressed at small national gatherings, with a more diplomatic stance adopted in front of foreign audiences. Following the alleged coup of 2016, but particularly after 2019, Turkey took an increasingly antagonistic approach, with Erdoğan even going so far as to imply interest in acquiring nuclear weapons [1].

4. Internal–External Interface in Turkey's Nuclear Rhetoric

This section contextualizes Turkey's shifting nonproliferation rhetoric and establishes the rationale behind these discourses. It is organized by the level of decision-making, beginning with foreign relations and international commitments, then turning to the Middle East regional context, and finally to leadership style and identity.

a. Foreign Relations and International Commitments

Turkey has been a prominent member of the NATO security architecture since the Cold War, and for a time, it pursued a democratization and reform program through the EU accession process. The hosting of US tactical nuclear weapons under the NATO umbrella at the Incirlik Air Base has meanwhile come to symbolize the US commitment to Turkey's national security. Until 2016, these international engagements were a shared state policy regardless of the particular administration in power. It is notable that since the alleged coup of 2016, Turkey has distanced itself both from NATO and the EU. Most recently, Turkey has prioritized security issues with a policy agenda that synthesizes religious conservatism and nationalism at the expense of basic principles of democratic values.

Simultaneously, Turkey has begun to restructure its international political orientation, distancing itself from the US and Europe and moving closer to Russia in a way that is unparalleled in Turkish history [71]. Turkey initiated a process of normalization of its ties with Russia in late June 2016, by apologizing for the downing a Russian warplane the year before [72]. More recently, the invasion of Ukraine has complicated relations with Russia, although Turkey has managed to strike a balancing act—and even provided some delicate interlocutory assistance in the conflict [73]. Regarding the EU, the refugee crisis has destabilized the relationship between Turkey and other European countries, and from 2015 onward, key government figures, including Erdoğan, began to

use the situation as leverage to influence EU policy toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).¹⁰

Following the ostensible coup on July 15, 2016, Turkish media organizations and several high-level officials quickly jumped to link the incident to the US—even though all of Turkey’s allies resolutely rejected such allegations [74, 75]. This event was a turning point for Turkey not only in its foreign relations but also in precipitating a sharp deterioration of democracy and the rule of law. Erdoğan’s push to replace parliamentary democracy with an authoritarian presidential system and backsliding of democratic norms particularly raised alarm in Euro-Atlantic circles. Whether Turkey has been disentangling from NATO and replacing what can be called a Western historical outlook with a Eurasian one also became a widely discussed topic [76]. Furthermore, Turkey’s rapprochement with Russia intersected with shifts in Turkey’s domestic political landscape where “the conservative and religious segments of Turkish society and the secular nationalists and Marxist/anti-imperialist (i.e., Ulusalci) groups” developed a pragmatic alliance [77].

The most significant rift between Ankara and Washington concerned the US stance against the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. Turkey considers the YPG as a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, leading it to accuse the US of relying on a terrorist organization to fight the ground war against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant from the mid-2010s. Turkey feared US support could eventually lead to a Kurdish state in northern Syria along its border. Another development that fundamentally changed Ankara’s calculus in Syria was Russia’s 2015 intervention in the country, with Russian antiaccess/area-denial systems deployed to Syria to assert control over the conflict. This led to Turkey seeking some form of accommodation with Russia to safeguard Turkish interests in Syria [78].

US–Turkish relations experienced a historic low point in other ways during this period. In August 2018, the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the US Department of the Treasury sanctioned Turkey’s Minister of Justice Abdulhamit Gül and Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu. Gül and Soylu were considered to have played leading roles in organizations responsible for the arrest and detention of a US citizen, Pastor Andrew Brunson. He had been arrested in Izmir, Turkey, in October 2016, and was accused by the Turkish authorities of aiding armed terrorist organizations and obtaining confidential government information for political and military espionage [79]. Then in July 2019, the US officially declared that Turkey’s involvement with the F-35 Dual Capable Aircraft project would be revoked because of Ankara’s decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems [80]. This decision is perhaps the most significant development in relation to Turkey’s role in NATO’s nuclear deterrence strategy because the F-35 fighters were intended as Turkey’s future dual-capable aircraft.

¹⁰ In the same way that Erdoğan has attempted to use refugees as leverage against the EU, nuclear weapon rhetoric has the potential to be employed by him to prevent political pressure from EU countries and as a bargaining chip for imposing certain policy options.

In the aftermath of President Donald Trump's order to withdraw American troops from northeast Syria and following a Turkish offensive in October 2019, various quarters called to expel Turkey from NATO [81]. *The New York Times* reported that US officials were reviewing plans regarding nuclear weapons at Incirlik [82]. It was even argued that the US Air Force should withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from Incirlik [83]. On December 11, 2019, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill calling for the imposition of Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions against Turkey over its purchase of the Russian S-400 defense system, followed by a similar bill introduced on July 17, 2020 [84, 85]. On December 14, 2020, the US formally imposed sanctions against Turkey under CAATSA [86]. With Erdoğan in power, it is difficult to see significant improvement in the complicated relationship between Turkey and the US, although there has been meaningful progress since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

On December 15, 2019, when asked on Turkish television whether Ankara was considering closing down Incirlik and Kurecik, Erdoğan responded, "If it is necessary for us to take such a step, of course we have the authority... Together with our delegations, we will close down Incirlik if necessary, and Turkey can also close down the Kurecik Radar Station if necessary. If they are threatening us with the implementation of these sanctions, of course we will be retaliating" [87]. Because Incirlik hosts tactical nuclear weapons and Kurecik provides early warning against ballistic missile attacks to the alliance, both locations play a crucial role in NATO's nuclear posture.

Turkey's international security posture has substantially changed since 2016, altering the country's outward rhetoric. Bilateral relations with the US came to a head in 2018 when Washington imposed sanctions against Turkish politicians—an extraordinary move given the context of NATO and Turkey hosting US nuclear weapons. Tensions with the EU have also been simmering, both with Erdoğan weaponizing the refugee crisis as a bargaining chip against member states and with competing claims over hydrocarbon exploration and drilling rights in the Mediterranean Sea [88]. Reduced US commitment in the Middle East under Trump and Turkey's growing military ties with Russia have also changed Turkey's position on the international stage. Notably, these are all factors that were predicted by scholars such as Fuerth to influence Turkey's nonproliferation commitments. Most recently, the Ukraine war has helped normalize Turkey's relations with Western states, but this is an uneasy truce and conditional on the balance of power once the war ends, as well as the evolving dynamics of the US–China great power rivalry.

b. The Regional Context

Although a significant part of the debate on Turkey's nuclear policy takes place in the international arena with the US and European states and organizations such as NATO, discourses are also fueled by the MENA security landscape, Turkey's role in regional conflicts and treaties, and regional identity politics. Since 2016, Turkey's soft power foreign policy tools—particularly diplomacy, cooperation, and economic agreements, which promote its traditional policy of "zero problems with neighbors"—have been increasingly replaced with hostile rhetoric and an emphasis on military power [89].

Turkey has also wielded hard power in the Middle East through unilateral military interventions in Syria and Libya and, alongside Russia, has taken a more strategic position in regional security affairs. It conducted military operations in Syria against YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces and Assad's military advance in Idlib,¹¹ and in early 2020, Turkey sent troops to support the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Libya, where Russia supports the eastern-based Libyan National Army in Tobruk [91, 92]. Nevertheless, Ankara and Moscow's preferred outcomes in both the Syrian and Libyan conflicts are at odds, and Russia's increasing presence and influence in the south and eastern Mediterranean go against Turkey's long-term interests [93]. Turkey's nuclear policy is not only affected by regional conflicts; it is also subject to the changing dynamics of the regional nuclear order. Most evidently, Turkey has become more involved in the regional nuclear security dilemma, which partly explains its continued discursive emphasis on a nuclear weapon-free Middle East. In turn, this has worked as a catalyst in amplifying Turkey's identity rhetoric to regional audiences, including in the area of the civilian nuclear industry.

An element that particularly stands out in Turkey's recent rhetoric on nuclear issues concerns religion. In November 2017, President Erdoğan said developing nuclear weapon technology was "contrary to the Muslim mindset" and that "Islam...opposes such a development" [58]. However, in this same speech, he also added, "the power war in the world requires you to have such weapons, even if you don't want to." This last sentence poses a dilemma: although Erdoğan says Islam prohibits developing these weapons, he is suggesting that a global "power war" is forcing Turkey to question its nuclear posture. The vast majority of Turkey's population currently identifies as Muslim [94] even though Turkey still officially remains a secular state; since the 1928 constitutional amendment followed by reforms of first President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, it has had no official religion [95]. Turkey's relationship with secularism and Islam has been continuously reinterpreted and reshaped over the past century, as demonstrated with the recent transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque [96, 97]. This event was a particular desire of Erdoğan's AKP party, which has encouraged ethnonationalism [98].

In fact, Erdoğan has not been the only world leader to bring religion into the nuclear weapons debate and highlight moral dilemmas; a rich body of literature is available on this theme [99], and it spans all world religions. Religious rhetoric has historically been used by leaders in the Middle East to take a stance against nuclear weapons. This tactic promotes peace and reassurance among domestic publics as well as international audiences. It is also a signal exchanged between regional leaders, reminding one other that nuclear proliferation and indiscriminate killing go against their morals and values. Indeed, it might even be argued that the recent shift in Turkish nuclear rhetoric to encompass religion brings Turkey more in line with its MENA neighbors. Nevertheless, more recently, regional leaders have employed rhetoric to make a case for proliferation, with Iran used as a case in point as a regional proliferator, underscoring the fluidity of these concerns.

¹¹ See, for example, Hashmi, S. H.; Lee, S. P., Eds. *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, 2004.

c. Leadership Style and Identity

On a national level, Erdoğan has worked to recalibrate Turkey's national nuclear identity and policies. This has received a mixed response, with some support from conservative publics in regional countries but concerns within other governments, especially those in the West [99]. Although political leadership relies on backing from the ruling party and its supporters, interpersonal relations between leaders often determine alignments in foreign policy [100]. Notable personality characteristics of leaders include background and education, charisma and authority, degree of national identity, nationalism, and emotions such as fear and pride [101]. Although some leaders see nuclear weapons as a means to deter rivals, others regard the discussion alone as a source of power and political influence [102].

Erdoğan's statement in 2019 that "there is no developed nation in the world that does not have them" indicates that he attaches prestige to nuclear weapons. Aylin Görener and Meltem Ucal characterize Erdoğan's leadership style by the following elements: an aversion to building consensus and achieving compromise (a contributing factor in Turkey's deteriorating relationship with the EU and NATO), a tendency to challenge constraints in the environment (the double standard), being closed to contradictory information (both international and domestic concerns about Turkey's nuclear energy ambitions), impulsive and combative behavior (e.g., clashing with Israel), and also seeking opportunities for cooperative relationships (e.g., backing of Iran's nuclear energy program) [103]. Furthermore, because other leaders have openly questioned whether Turkey might pose a proliferation risk for over two decades, Erdoğan has begun to actively play into this concern. This process has been accelerated by events since 2016, and it is likely to intensify further following the centenary of the Turkish Republic in 2023.

5. Conclusion

This article has taken a loose discourse practice approach to public statements made by the Turkish political leadership about nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament, contrasting Turkey's official policy toward nuclear issues before and after the alleged coup attempt of 2016. After this dramatic event, a shift in rhetoric took place. Historically, Turkey had tended not to wade into debates on disarmament or nonproliferation, restricting this debate to advocating mainly for a nuclear weapon-free Middle East; subsequently, Turkey's stance changed to a position that called for a total global elimination of nuclear weapons—indicating that its Western allies should disarm—while even appearing to hint at times that any state should have equal rights to develop them. This stance is part of a broader shift in domestic politics and international security posture, with Turkey gradually distancing itself from Europe and the US. As a result of this recalibration, Turkey has made drastic changes in its rhetoric to domestic audiences, introducing a new focus on nuclear proliferation, which previously had been the preserve of external-facing discussions.

Turkish Government ministers have taken great care when making statements to an international audience regarding nuclear nonproliferation and especially disarmament. However, in a domestic and regional context, they are more comfortable making bolder

declarations that justify and reinforce changes to nuclear policy. In Turkey, national media and events are used as a tool to shape public opinion, as illustrated by critical commentary on allegations in the German media about Turkish collaboration with Pakistan and prominent speeches held at seemingly irrelevant events. In the future, it would be worth expanding this study to include media analysis focusing on local communities to increase knowledge on public debates at bureaucratic levels lower than the central government.

At the heart of the discussion lies Turkey's perception of a double standard in international nonproliferation efforts, in that certain aspiring and emerging nuclear states are treated differently from others. Within international forums, Turkey's nuclear energy projects are rarely addressed in isolation from the risk of proliferation. Notably, however, many of Turkey's responses remain contradictory. On one hand, Turkey hosts nuclear weapons, but on the other hand, the country is advocating for global disarmament. Prior to 2016, it can be argued that any mention of proliferation in the Turkish context was merely rhetoric—words chosen for political reasons without any intent for policy change. This rhetoric was cyclical, with Turkey responding to unease raised by the international community, which, in turn, would keep the subject on the agenda and cause further apprehension.

So, will words translate into tangible change to Turkey's nuclear policy? Although the controversial post-2016 statements have only involved speculation, the fact that the Turkish leadership feels emboldened to inject controversial rhetoric into nuclear debates suggests that nonproliferation norms are less embedded in Turkey than they were previously. The leadership is also prepared to risk giving tacit support to regional proliferators by making misleading statements on nuclear weapons, such as generalizing that richer countries all support nuclear weapons. Concrete modifications to Turkish Government policy will remain dependent on international, regional, and domestic developments—including Turkey's ties with the US, NATO and EU; nuclear proliferation in Iran and countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia; and on the state of democracy and rule of law within Turkey itself. This article has consciously not presented any strategic predictions; instead, it has focused on explaining recent changes to Turkey's nonproliferation and disarmament discourses. It is crucial to continue monitoring Turkey's nuclear narratives to determine differences between implied and real state policy shifts to help conceptualize the direction that Turkey goes next.

6. Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in the writing of this article. IJNS declares no conflicts of interest in the double-blind peer review process for this article.

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